

CU-Boulder to replace herbicide use on campus with 'compost tea'

Campus commits to moving towards herbicide free turf

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The University of Colorado will be phasing out its use of herbicides on campus fields, and instead treating grounds with a more natural "compost tea," a liquid that can be used as both a fertilizer and to prevent plant diseases.

The switch could cost the university up to \$90,000 extra a year, said Frank Bruno, vice chancellor for planning and administration at CU-Boulder. Bruno said he carefully weighed the idea after he and Deb Coffin, dean of students, charged a Turf Task Force to study the impacts of herbicides on campus and explore alternatives.

Student leaders have praised the administration's decision to eliminate herbicides.

They previously raised concerns that the toxic pesticides were used near family housing units and the fact that they were sprayed on turf areas while school was in session, said Dan Omasta, a recent CU graduate and, as a student leader, was the campus's sustainability director. He said students were concerned about the environmental and health impacts caused by the toxins in herbicides, including the threat to honeybee populations when the chemicals were sprayed on flowering weeds, like dandelions.

"The student body is very proud of the university's decision to continue its legacy of progressive sustainability leadership and supports the timely transition away from harmful toxic pesticides," Omasta said. "By incorporating more organic approaches that help to build turf health and prevent weeds in the first place, CU has the opportunity to demonstrate that there is no need to spray ourselves with poison in order to maintain a green lawn."

Another problem raised with the application of synthetic pesticides is that they actually kill many of the good bacteria in the soil that help provide nutrients to the grass that the campus is trying to grow in the first place. CU officials have outlined a proposal to move toward herbicide free lawns, and Bruno said it may require some students and employees to pluck stubborn weeds.

"The campus may look a little different," Bruno said. "There may be more dandelions required to be mechanically pulled."

The first phase would reduce the use of herbicides on turf areas by 45 percent in 2011 over the quantities used for the 2009 growing season. The second phase would scale down synthetic herbicides on turf areas by 93 percent in 2012 over the 2009 figures.

By the end of 2012, all turf areas will no longer receive synthetic herbicide applications -- except for those areas that are extremely difficult to manage. Campus officials say that's about 7 percent of the total turf area.

The final phase includes eliminating the use of synthetic pesticides, which includes herbicides for turf, in all landscaped beds. After the 2016 growing season, no synthetic pesticides will be used for landscaping.

CU-Boulder implemented a pesticide use and integrated pest management policy in May 2002. This is another step in the policy, school officials said.

Bruno said that the university, city of Boulder and Boulder County partnered to hold a workshop with Chip Osbourne, founder of Osborne Organics, and who has more than a decade of experience in creating sustainable and athletic fields and landscapes.

"He spent time looking around our turf and making some candid, practical recommendations," Bruno said.

The campus purchased a new compost tea brewer, which is about 8 feet tall and brews nutrients that can help create healthy soil and push out weeds, said John Morris, director of Facilities Operations.

The new turf-management plans fit into the campus's sustainability goals, he said.

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