Chris O'Brien

From: marian falla <mjfalla@outlook.com>
Sent: Monday, April 29, 2024 2:01 PM
To: House Finance Committee
Cc: Rep. Finkelman, Alex S.
Subject: testimony for hearing on 02May24 for bill 7495 leaf blower legislation

To: Chairman Marvin L. Abney and the House Finance Committee
From: Marian Falla
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Re: testimony for hearing on 02May24 for bill 7495 leaf blower legislation
ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- 2025 BATTERY-POWERED LEAF BLOWER PILOT REBATE AND EDUCATION PROGRAM (Establishes a new chapter for the 2024 Battery Powered Leaf Blower Pilot Rebate and Education Program.)

I support bill 7495. This bill should represent the first phase of a multi-year program (i.e., the pilot an education program and rebate program) whose long term goal is the elimination of gas leaf blowers from our state. Gas leaf blowers are emitting toxic fumes as well as noise pollution and must be phased out. It is suggested that the pilot proceed and be followed by a phase two that would be completed over time and maybe even involve 'green' certification of operators that switched to electric equipment.

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Possible approach after the pilot is for RI State regulation is support the phase out gas powered leaf blowers, phase in electric, like what Burlington Vt has done.

Burlington Vermont "mandates moving to quieter electric-powered leaf blowers"… https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/city-bans-loud-gas-powered-leaf-blowers77140057 https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/life/2021/04/15/burlingtonapproves-ban-gas-powered-leaf-blowers-noise-transition-electric/7234420002/
The RI State regulation could include tax credits (like electric cars) and/or buyback program (like guns) and a 'green' certification program.

Long Term Solution (after pilot)
https://www.bobvila.com/articles/the-war-on-leaf-blowers/
"Given the environmental impact of gas-powered leaf blowers, the hearing damage they can cause, and their nuisance in neighborhoods all over the nation, it's understandable that municipalities are demanding these machines become a thing of the past. Fortunately, there are plenty of electric leaf blowers available to get the job done if you still want to blow your leaves."

Extracts from recent internet search regarding Gas Leaf Blowers and pollution:

In 2020, fossil fuel-powered lawn equipment emitted more than 30 million tons of carbon dioxide, the leading driver of climate change. To put that in context, that's as much carbon pollution as comes out of the tailpipes of 6.6 million cars over the course of a year.

Gas Leaf Blower Toxic exhaust: More than 30% of a leaf blower's fuel/oil mixture gets emitted unburned as an aerosol that contains a host of toxins that can cause eye, skin and respiratory tract irritation, neurological effects, and has been linked to lymphoma, leukemia and other types of cancer.

Gas-powered leaf blowers can produce a lot of pollution, including toxic chemicals, planet-warming emissions, and smog-forming pollution. According to a 2011 study, a consumer-grade leaf blower emits 23 times more carbon monoxide, double the nitrous oxide, and nearly 300 times more hydrocarbons than a Ford F-150 Raptor pickup truck. A California Air Resources Board report estimates that using a commercial leaf blower for one hour produces as much smog-forming pollution as driving 1,100 miles in a car.

Leaf blowers emit exhaust fumes and particulate matter, which can be harmful to both the environment and human health. A third of the fuel that leaf blowers use is vented into the atmosphere as unburned fuel, along with other chemicals that create smog and cause acid rain.

Electric lawn equipment is a cleaner, quieter alternative to gas-powered leaf blowers, as it emits zero planet-warming emissions. Electric lawn equipment can also be cheaper to own and operate than gas-powered equipment, as it has lower fuel and maintenance costs.

Most gas-powered leaf blowers use two-cycle engines, which produce hundreds of times more hazardous pollutants and fine particulates than automobiles. In California, small engines such as those in leaf blowers overtook automobiles in 2020 to become the number one source of air pollution.

https://ecori.org/gas-powered-leaf-blowers-need-to-go

A FRANK TAKE

Gas-Powered Leaf Blowers Need to Go

Lawn envy pollutes neighborhoods with noise and poisons

By Frank Carini / ecoRI News columnist
April 4, 2024
Gasoline-powered leaf blowers produce a ridiculous amount of pollution. (istock)

BRISTOL, R.I. — The roar of and the fine particulate matter spit from gasoline-powered leaf blowers and, to a somewhat lesser extent, lawn mowers forced George Voutes to move.

"It was the lawn stuff. Mostly leaf blowers that are incessant in every suburban town in America," he said. "They're just everywhere."

After 22 years in Barrington, the northern New Jersey native recently moved a few towns over, leaving a neighborhood in the center of town with dense housing on quarter-acre lots to a more spacious area in Bristol not too far from downtown. He hopes the move lessens his daily intake of leaf-blower screech and pollution.

He realizes not everyone has the resources to (hopefully) move away from problems, whether big or small.

The Barrington neighborhood he lived in since 2011 echoed with the sound of "whaaaaa, whaaaaa" and other lawn-care equipment noise for much of the year. The machines' poisonous emissions casting an almost-daily haze over the neighborhood.

The 60-year-old co-founded Quiet Clean RI to encourage the state and its 39 municipalities to transition away from gas-powered landscaping equipment. A 2023 petition Voutes started to stop the sale and use of gas-powered leaf blowers produced some awareness but otherwise didn't move the needle at the Statehouse or the local town hall. Quiet Clean RI has launched another petition that asks the General Assembly to pass legislation to phase out the sale and use of gas-powered leaf blowers.

So far, such efforts have been a slow push, as neither the state nor any of its communities have done much to address the problem. Last year a bill filed in the House called the "Zero-Emission Lawn Care Devices Act" went nowhere.

The law, which would have mandated that all powered lawn and garden equipment sold in the state be electric by Jan. 1, 2025, and that all in-use equipment have zero emissions by Jan. 1, 2028, was opposed by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute.

Purchasing trends in electric lawn-care equipment make H5549 and other legislative action unnecessary, according to testimony submitted by the Virginia-based trade association.

A 2021 ordinance introduced by a Providence City Council member would have prohibited the use of leaf blowers with an average sound level exceeding 65 decibels in residential zones, and prohibited the operation of leaf blowers throughout the city from 6 p.m.-9 a.m.

The lawn-care industry pushed back, claiming small landscaping companies would be put out of business, jobs would be lost, work production would decrease, the cost of landscaping services would climb, and the physical burden placed upon landscape workers would increase — all because less-powerful leaf blowers would be required in neighborhoods and none allowed before 9 a.m. and after 6 p.m.

In the summer, leaf blowers are mainly used to clear grass clippings off driveways, pavement, and concrete walkways — an absurd reason to pollute ourselves and the environment.

Voutes suggested banning gas-powered leaf blowers in late spring, the summer, and early fall when there are no leaves to be raked. (By the way, the more leaves left on your lawn or in your garden, the healthier your soil and the plants it feeds become.)

In February a House bill (H7495) named the "2025 Battery-Powered Leaf Blower Pilot Rebate and Education Program" was filed. The legislation would establish a pilot rebate program to be operated through the Office of Energy Resources for the purchase of battery-powered leaf blowers. The rebate program would be funded by an initial appropriation of $350,000.

About 100 municipalities nationwide have banned gas-powered leaf blowers or limited their use. In Massachusetts, Arlington, Belmont, Concord, and Lexington have voted to phase in year-round bans on gas-powered leaf blowers. Swampscott has decided to prohibit the machines from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

In Connecticut, Norwalk and Westport have passed ordinances to restrict fossil fuel-powered leaf blowers.

In 2021 California became the first state to ban all gasoline-powered lawn equipment, requiring new lawn mowers and leaf blowers to be zero-emission by this year.

The amount of air and noise pollution created to maintain lifeless outdoor carpets and leaf-free yards is a long-ignored public health issue and a mindless climate crisis exacerbator. Burning some 800 million gallons of gasoline every weekend to cut U.S. lawns is scary stupid.

Some gasoline-powered lawn and garden equipment — leaf blowers, lawn mowers, weed wackers, hedge trimmers — emit as much pollution in an hour as driving hundreds of miles in a car. Much of this pollution is generated in neighborhoods, where people live, play, and relax.

To help reduce the air and noise pollution from gas-powered leaf blowers in their Westerly neighborhood, Geoff Kaufman and his wife, Penny Parsekian, bought and donated an electric one to the caretaker of nearby Wilcox Park.

Kaufman said the caretaker was grateful, and he and his staff use the battery-powered one on occasion, but he was told gas-powered leaf blowers were required to collect leaves at the High Street park.

Whatever happened to using rakes?

Voutes and his allies want to remove fossil fuels from landscape maintenance, by promoting "quieter, cleaner, healthier landscaping alternatives" — from electric lawn-care equipment to replacing lawns with pollinator gardens to planting trees.

Landscapers would still be needed. They would just be working with less-polluting tools and doing more environmentally friendly work.

Voutes blames the machines, not the people operating them.

"I think that is a critical point. It's the machines that we're talking about. They're used to make money and to do it quickly and as efficiently as possible," he said. "The majority of us want to see these gas-powered leaf blowers and eventually gas-powered lawn equipment sunsetted and moved out. But it's just such an ingrained behavior in American society. And I mean America, because the rest of the world doesn't operate like this."

Voutes discovered the deep unpleasantness of these machines when the pandemic changed how the corporate engineer worked.

"Working at home, it really became obvious that these things are terribly annoying and, more than that, they're incredibly horrifying from an ecological perspective," he said. "People have become accustomed to using these machines that blow the hell out of everything in existence and the awful pollution and noise that emits from these disruptive machines."

He began researching the environmental impact the machines inflict when COVID forced lockdowns. He learned leaf blowers powered by gasoline are "epic polluters, given the antiquated design of the 2-stroke engine that mixes oil and gas, burning some of it and aerosolizing the rest."

His research found our obsession with having a manicured lawn began soon after World War II.

"The search for the perfect landscape is at the root of why these machines are used so much," Voutes said. "A perfect lawn is still considered a sign of success."

Every weekend for much of the year, the roar of fossil fuel-powered lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and weed whackers belch pollution into the air. This unhealthy obsession with Norman Rockwell lawns is exemplified by one of my neighbors who mows his lawn every two days for most of the spring, summer, and fall. He had his customary earmuffs on — to block the noise, not the cold — during an early December spin on his riding mower that is more farm equipment than residential lawn care.

Those 800 million gallons of weekend spent fuel don't include the gasoline and oil burned to mow lawns during the week or by landscaping companies. It's just the amount used by about 54 million Americans to mow their lawns on Saturdays and Sundays. (My mowing-fanatic neighbor hits all seven days.)

/Pollinator gardens instead of lawn makes you and the natural world healthier. (Frank Carini/ecoRI News)

Pollution from those millions of lawn-care machines accumulates. According to 2020 data from the Environmental Protection Agency, all of this fossil fuel-powered equipment emitted:

Nearly 22,000 tons of fine particulates — pollutants that have been linked to respiratory ailments, reproductive and mental health issues, and premature death. That is as much pollution as would be produced annually by 230 million average cars.

More than 68,000 tons of nitrogen oxides and 350,000 tons of volatile organic compounds — the two chemical components of ground-level ozone, which triggers asthma attacks and contributes to other health problems. Nitrogen oxide emissions from lawn-care equipment are equal to annual emissions from 30 million average cars.

More than 30 million tons of carbon dioxide, the leading cause of global warming, and a wide array of chemicals that cause cancer, including benzene and formaldehyde.

All of that air pollution in just one year of mowing, whacking, and blowing to manicure an outdated status symbol in a time off crisis.

"Grass doesn't store any carbon, but a lot of our native pollinator plants have really deep roots and, like, trees store much more carbon," Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management supervising biologist David Kalb said. "Your European grass does nothing for the native environment."

All this fossil fuel-powered lawn-care equipment is also extremely noisy. Leaf blowers emit between 80 and 85 decibels, but cheap or mid-range ones can emit up to 112 decibels. Lawn mowers range from 82 to 90 decibels. Weed whackers can emit up 96 decibels of noise.

What is it going to take for people to realize replacing their lawns with native trees, shrubs, flowers, and ground cover is better for their health and the natural world? Maintained wild also provides the same benefits.

The Framingham, Mass-based Native Plant Trust defines "native" as plants growing in New England before European settlement. A yard with a diverse mixture of native vegetation is cheaper to maintain, easier to take care of, environmentally beneficial, and is more interesting.

Native plants also support native wildlife and insects, are better accustomed to the weather and soil, and are pest resistant. They support the pollinators of our food crops, clean the air and water, and help regulate the climate. They also make good natural buffers, which capture rainfall and filter stormwater runoff.

To create this type of easy-to-maintain, environmentally friendly habitat, buy native trees, shrubs, and plants from local nurseries that grow their own stock. It is important, according to native-first landscapers, to layer the different species, cluster the same ones together — it creates shelter for wildlife — choose plants that produce pollen and nectar, and have an equal percentage of evergreen and deciduous species.

Start making the change this spring to healthier yard choices.

Note: A great place for native plant information, advice, and plants is the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society.