My name is Sue and I was very happy to take part in the watershed survey of Lake Messalonskee back in late September. My husband and I own a lakefront property in Sidney, ME, and I have been vacationing on Lake Messalonskee since I was a little kid.  I hope you don’t mind me contacting you (got your email from the watershed training slides), but I do have a quick question that I wish I asked when meeting for the survey but didn’t.

I realize that the survey was focused on erosion.  I was wondering about the impact of treated and manicured lawns on lake health, particularly ones that are directly on the lake.  Don’t lawn treatments such as fertilizers, weed control and grub control chemicals cause problems for lakes as well?  Are there any Maine state laws that ideally ban or limit use of lawn chemicals for lakefront properties, or is enforcement an issue?  I was just wondering, as I do find it disturbing to see these nice green lawns on the lake and wonder what they are doing to make it look so nice and how much of what they are doing ends up in the lake.
Would love to hear your thoughts.

Many thanks!

Hi Sue,
Use of fertilizer and pesticides in the shoreland zone is definitely something that gets documented during a watershed survey. The tricky part is that a green lawn isn't always an indicator that someone uses fertilizer, and without a landowner being present at the time of the survey it is difficult to know when it is and when it is not. Several properties I surveyed this year looked like they would have been fertilized but when I asked the landowner if they used fertilizer in 90% of cases they say no. In some instances the grass just grows well because of the wet conditions and lack of overstory, and in one instance the landowner had aerated his and his neighbors yards and it just came in very lush. I documented a site that had one of the little pesticide signs you see around town on a lakefront property- a clear indicator that they are definitely using herbicides or pesticides (see attached).

So- the long and the short of it is there is definitely an education and outreach need as many of the yards we saw were very manicured and not as lake-friendly as we'd like to see with natural vegetation along the shoreline. Another issue with grass is that it does not do a good job of infiltrating water, so there often ends up being sheet flow over the grass to the lake. Adding even a 10' wide natural buffer between the lake and lawn would do a lot of good for the lake and water quality. For the watershed survey the “LakeSmart Referral" form documented properties with grass straight to the lake even if there was no active erosion. There are ~ 120 properties on that list. My understanding is that FOM will be following up with the property owners on this list with educational materials about the importance of buffers and becoming LakeSmart. I've copied Janna Townshend here as she is the LakeSmart coordinator for FOM and will be coordinating that effort.

There is a state law that prohibits use of fertilizer within 25' of the lakeshore that was pushed through the legislature by Maine Lakes a few years ago (they were shooting for 75' but settled for 25' after some pushback). The state also prohibits the sale of fertilizer containing phosphorus and requires that stores include educational signage near these products. Enforcement is definitely an issue, but also education- the average homeowner has no way of knowing that this is even a law- let alone the towns adopting it in their ordinances. Thanks for reaching out.

-Jen

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