

Little engines, big problem

By Lois Levin

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“Spring has sprung, the grass is riz”, and from now until December, there will be precious few days free of the buzzing, whining, rumbling, and always irritating, sound of power lawn equipment in every village of Newton.

There are 52 million gas-powered mowers in the US and probably millions more gas-powered weed whackers and leaf blowers. Their emissions are responsible for an estimated 10% of all air pollution in the US. These small engines are making a disproportionately large contribution to global warming. Newton, the Garden City, with its many lawns and mowed fields, is part of the problem.

Now the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is proposing to require pollution control devices on all gas-powered lawn equipment. The EPA says that a catalytic converter is the most effective approach to cutting emissions from small engines, and the devices available now can reduce emissions by at least one-third.

The largest manufacturer of engines that power lawn equipment spent millions last year lobbying against a California legislative proposal to regulate emissions from these engines. The company claimed that catalytic converters are a fire hazard. False. In fact, some of the newer catalytic converters allow engines to run cooler. The manufacturer also claimed that adding a catalytic converter would increase prices for power lawn equipment. True, but the cost is modest. Decades ago, when catalytic converters were being proposed for automobiles, US automakers used these same arguments, and they obstructed change for years. Today, every car is equipped with a safe and affordable catalytic converter provided by these same companies.

Cutting emissions from small engines will have a significant public health impact, especially for vulnerable groups like asthmatics and landscape workers. Everyone benefits from cleaner air.

Once new regulations are enacted, manufacturers will accommodate to them. Corporations routinely lobby for voluntary environmental and health guidelines, but governmental action is often required to raise the bar. When lower emissions are mandated, deadlines are set for compliance and penalties are established for non-compliance, companies will stop worrying about what the competition is doing and start to focus on how to modify their policies and procedures to protect the public interest.

Certainly adapting to new regulations often incurs costs, and most of those costs are ultimately passed on to customers. But who would not want to pay a few bucks for a catalytic converter on a lawnmower for the benefit of significantly cleaner, healthier air?

Newton could wait for new EPA regulations to come into effect, or the city could start now to improve its environmental stewardship and promote public health by requiring catalytic converters on all lawn equipment used in the city.