Zoom Without Muting: Leaf Blower Bans, Restrictions Gain

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CITIES and states around the country are reining in the ubiquitous gas-powered leaf blower. The efforts take a variety of forms that include seasonal and time-of-use restrictions, decibel limitations, and outright bans. A District of Columbia sales and use ban kicked in earlier this year. California's sales ban takes effect in 2024. On another tack, Arizona requires that certain localities restrict blower use to foster compliance with federal clean air standards.

Local enforcement approaches vary considerably. For example, some municipalities have hired dedicated enforcement staff (Princeton) and set up app-based citizen reporting systems (Palo Alto), while others require retailers to notify customers about blower bans (District of Columbia). Some ordinances authorize fines as high as $2,000 per violation (Montclair), but others require warnings for first-time violations (Evanston). Some localities have stipulated that they will only impose fines for gross and repeated violations (Wilmette).

New lawncare approaches reduce the need for the polluting machines

Local and state efforts to address the deleterious effects of blowers, which are now promoted for cleaning out snow, gutters, spider webs, and even rodents, are driven by myriad concerns—climate change, air pollution, public health, and worker safety.

The primary culprit is the two-stroke engine that powers most gas-powered blowers—a technology characterized by James Fallow writing in the *Atlantic* as "so crude and old, the level of pollution is off the charts . . . because by design it sloshes together a mixture of gasoline and oil in the combustion chamber and then spews out as much as one-third of that fuel as an unburned aerosol."

Although restrictions on blowers are hardly new—Beverly Hills banned them in the 1970s—climate change is now a key factor driving municipal efforts to reduce blowers' carbon dioxide and nitrous oxides emissions. Municipal climate mitigation measures range from sponsoring education programs (Charleston) to requiring use of electric blowers in park maintenance (Dallas). Electric blower rebate programs are also popular, including those sponsored by municipally owned utilities such as San Antonio's CPS Energy.

In addition to greenhouse gases, gas-powered blowers emit a host of air pollutants associated with a wide range of negative health effects. The pollutants, which include hydrocarbons (an ozone precursor), carbon monoxide, fine particulate matter, and benzene, can be emitted in prodigious amounts. Furthermore, blowers can produce gusts as strong as 280 miles per hour, thereby stirring up pollen, pesticides, and other contaminants.

Noise pollution is also a key concern. At certain decibel levels and durations blowers can cause permanent hearing damage.

Taken together, toxic emissions, airborne contaminants, and high decibel noise pollution constitute a suite of environmental and health risks, particularly for workers who regularly operate blowers. Many of these workers—more than half of whom are Hispanic according to a National Association of Landscape Professionals Foundation study—may not be able to secure appropriate protective measures.

For many communities, however, the driving concern is the sheer annoyance factor, which is largely attributable to the strong, low frequency sound that emanates from gas-powered blowers. Quiet Communities, Inc., explains that "low frequency sound travels over long distances and penetrates walls and windows," which accounts for the intrusive nature of the sound generated by gas-powered blowers.

Blower restrictions are not without critics, who cite the cost to landscapers and point out that electric blowers lack power and need to be recharged frequently. Workforce constraints also come into play, as National Association of Landscape Professionals' Bob Mann explained to the D.C. Council: "There simply aren't enough employees to wield leaf rakes to replace the work performed by leaf blowers."

In response, proponents tout the benefits of alternatives—to wit, raking and mulching—which include habitat preservation for butterflies that lay eggs in fallen leaves. And businesses, including those certified through the American Green Zone Alliance, are marketing a more natural, less manicured style of lawn care that eschews gas-powered blowers.

Nevertheless, new lawn care norms may be slow to evolve. But it does appear that the market is changing quickly. Stanley Black and Decker reports a five-year, 75 percent increase in North American manufacturers' shipments of electric-powered lawn equipment—a statistic consistent with Expert Market Research's prediction of "widespread adoption of electric variants." Furthermore, at least one manufacturer, Makita, has pledged to stop production of gas-powered lawn equipment.

Eventually the market may eliminate the need to regulate gas-powered blowers—but until that time, expect more bans and restrictions.