

Is There a Boom or Bust Coming For Natural Pest Control?

By Douglas Stern, Managing Partner Stern Environmental Group

The world is going green. “Green” is the color of environmental concern, the impetus that drives cutting-edge technology, the buzz word of the socially conscious. Concern for the environment and man’s impact on it is bringing a slew of new products to market, and pest control is no exception. Environmentally-friendly pest control services are growing in popularity, particularly in the commercial sector. Even eco-savvy residential consumers are asking about natural alternatives to traditional pesticides, but their ardor often cools when confronted with the 10% to 20% cost differential and lengthier treatment times, sometimes several weeks.

The raising of America’s environmental consciousness, coupled with increasingly stringent federal regulations governing traditional chemical pesticides, appears to be shifting the pest control industry’s focus to Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques. IPM is considered not only safer for the environment, but safer for people, pets and secondary scavengers such as owls. Of 378 pest management companies surveyed in 2008 by *Pest Control Technology* magazine, two-thirds said they offered IPM services of some sort.

Instead of lacing pest sites with a poisonous cocktail of powerful insecticides designed to kill, IPM focuses on environmentally-friendly prevention techniques designed to keep pests out. While low- or no-toxicity products may also be used to encourage pests to pack their bags, elimination and control efforts focus on finding and eliminating the causes of infestation: entry points, attractants, harborage and food.

Particularly popular with schools and nursing homes charged with guarding the health of the nation’s youngest and oldest citizens, those at greatest risk from hazardous chemicals, IPM is catching the attention of hotels, office buildings, apartment complexes and other commercial enterprises, as well as eco-conscious residential customers. Driven in equal parts by environmental concerns and health hazard fears, interest in IPM is bringing a host of new environmentally-friendly pest management products -- both high- and low-tech -- to market.

“Probably the best product out there is a door sweep,” confided Tom Green, president of the Integrated Pest Management Institute of North America, a non-profit organization that certifies green exterminating companies. In an *Associated Press* interview posted on MSNBC online last April, Green explained, “A mouse can squeeze through a hole the size of a pencil diameter. So if you’ve got a quarter-inch gap underneath your door, as far as a mouse is concerned, there’s no door there at all.” Cockroaches can slither through a one-eighth inch crevice.

IPM is “a better approach to pest control for the health of the home, the environment and the family,” said Cindy Mannes, spokeswoman for the National Pest Management Association, the \$6.3 billion pest control industry’s trade association, in the same *Associated Press* story. However, because IPM is a relatively new addition to the pest control arsenal, Mannes cautioned that there is little industry consensus on the definition of green services.

In an effort to create industry standards for IPM services and providers, the Integrated Pest Management Institute of North America developed the Green Shield Certified (GSC) program.

Identifying pest control products and companies that eschew traditional pesticides in favor of environmentally-friendly control methods, GSC is endorsed by the EPA, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and HUD. IPM favors mechanical, physical and cultural methods to control pests, but may use bio-pesticides derived from naturally-occurring materials such as animals, plants, bacteria and certain minerals.

Toxic chemical sprays are giving way to new, sometimes unconventional, methods of treating pests. Some are ultra high-tech like the quick-freeze Cryonite process for eliminating bed bugs. Others, like trained dogs that sniff out bed bugs, seem decidedly low-tech, but employ state-of-the-art methods to achieve results. For example, farmers have used dogs' sensitive noses to sniff out problem pests for centuries; but training dogs to sniff out explosives and drugs is a relatively recent development. Using those same techniques to teach dogs to sniff out termites and bed bugs is considered cutting-edge.

Another new pest control technique is birth control. When San Francisco was threatened by mosquitoes carrying potentially life-threatening West Nile Virus, bicycle messengers were hired to cruise the city and drop packets of biological insecticide into the city's 20,000 storm drains. A kind of birth control for mosquitoes, the new method was considered safer than aerial spraying with the chemical pyrethrum, the typical mosquito abatement procedure, according to a recent story posted on the National Public Radio website.

Naturally, there are efforts underway to build a better mousetrap. The innovative Track & Trap system attracts mice or rats to a food station dusted with fluorescent powder. Rodents leave a blacklight-visible trail that allows pest control experts to seal entry paths. Coming soon, NightWatch uses pheromone research to lure and trap bed bugs. In England, a sonic device designed to repel rats and squirrels is being tested, and the aptly named Rat Zapper is purported to deliver a lethal shock using just two AA batteries.

Alongside this influx of new environmentally-friendly products rides a posse of federal regulations. Critics of recent EPA regulations restricting the sale of certain pest-killing chemicals accuse the government of unfairly limiting a homeowner's ability to protect his property. The EPA's 2004 banning of the chemical diazinon for household use a couple of years ago removed a potent ant-killer from the homeowner's pest control arsenal. Similarly, 2008 EPA regulations prohibiting the sale of small quantities of effective rodenticides, unless sold inside an enclosed trap, has stripped rodent-killing chemicals from the shelves of hardware and home improvement stores, limiting the homeowner's ability to protect his property and family from these disease-carrying pests.

Acting for the public good, the government's pesticide-control actions are particularly aimed at protecting children. According to a May 20, 2008 report on CNN online, a study conducted by the American Association of Poison Control Centers indicated that rat poison was responsible for nearly 60,000 poisonings between 2001 and 2003, 250 of them resulting in serious injuries or death. National Wildlife Service testing in California found rodenticide residue in every animal tested.

Consumers are embracing the idea of natural pest control and environmentally-friendly, cutting-edge pest management products and techniques. Availability and government regulations are increasingly limiting consumers' self-treatment options, forcing them to turn to professional pest control companies for relief from pest invasions. While this has proved a viable option for commercial customers, few residential customers seem willing to pay higher prices for newer, more labor-intensive green pest control products and even fewer are willing to wait the additional week or two it may take these products to work. It is taking leadership efforts on the part of pest control companies to educate consumers in the long term benefits of green and natural pest treatments.

Even though the cold, hard truth is that when people have a pest problem, they want it gone and they want it gone now! If rats or mice are in their house destroying their property and threatening their family with disease, if termites or carpenter ants are eating away their home equity, if roaches are invading their kitchen or if they're sharing their bed with bed bugs, consumer interest in environmental friendliness plummets. When people call a pest control company, the bottom line is that they want the pests dead! Now! Pest control firms are standing up against the tide of consumer demand for immediate eradication by enhancing their natural and green pest control product offerings. These new natural products take the most responsible long term approach to pest control; one that protects our environment, children, and our own health. Sometimes it is lonely moving against the tide of popular demand, but true leadership, in the pest control industry, means embracing these new organic and natural technologies even when they are not popular with the consumer - yet.

About the Writer Douglas Stern

Douglas Stern is the managing partner of Stern Environmental Group and a [bed bug](#) extermination expert. His firm serves commercial and residential clients in New Jersey, New York City, New York, and Connecticut. His firm is located at 100 Plaza Drive in Secaucus, New Jersey. You can reach him toll free at 1-888-887-8376 or by email at info@sternenvironmental.com. Please visit us on the Web at www.SternEnvironmental.com (<http://www.sternenvironmental.com>).