

Comments on the St. Johns County Fertilizer-Use Ordinance

Go to Jail for Using Quick-Release Nitrogen?

Starting May 15, persons who fertilize turf with quick-release nitrogen sources in areas of St. Johns County commit a misdemeanor subject to a fine up to \$500, or 60 days imprisonment in the county jail, or both.

According to Paul Haydt, project director for the St. Johns Water Management District, "Slow-release fertilizers are typically applied once or twice a year, whereas the liquid quick-release kind is applied monthly, whether it is needed or not."

On Jan. 25, The Board of County Commissioners of St. Johns County enacted ordinance 2000-6 to prevent summertime (May 15 – Oct. 31) application of quick-release nitrogen sources (ammonium nitrate, ammonium sulfate, diammonium phosphate, potassium nitrate, urea other than slow release, monoammonium phosphate) which it determined could degrade the Guana Marsh Basin.

Covered by the ordinance are the unincorporated areas of St. Johns County bounded on the north by Duval County, on the east by the Atlantic Ocean, on the west by State Road A1A (when north of Mickler Road) and the western boundary of Guana State Park (when south of Mickler Road), and bounded on the south by the southern limit of Guana State Park. Exceptions are farm and commercial agricultural uses, golf course putting surfaces (greens), certified fertigation systems which are supervised on a daily basis, and certain situations of newly sodded, plugged, sprigged, and damaged turf areas. Administrative searches are authorized of any vehicle, container, or other equipment used in fertilizing while in St. Johns County. Anyone so equipped

and intending to fertilize for compensation shall be deemed to have consented to be searched. Any violation shall also be deemed a public nuisance.

The intent of this law is good. The execution is atrocious. First the technical points and then comments:

1. St. Johns County Commissioners appear to single out turfgrass, in the title of the ordinance ("providing for regulation of golf course, lawn, and turf fertilization"), but the General Provisions and definition of fertilizing ("applying . . . substances . . . [to] any grass, plant, or other organic material") is too broad. Thus the General Provision ("no Person shall Fertilize using Quick Release Nitrogen . . .") and the definition of fertilizing ("plants") applies to African Violets growing on a windowsill!

2. The General Provision applies to the Guana Marsh Basin which is never defined and is only implicit in the definition of the area jurisdiction (above). It should also be pointed out that the present Guana Lake was created artificially in 1957 with the damming of the Guana River.

3. The ordinance does not cover a substantial portion of the headwaters of the Guana State Park, such as the area north of Mickler Road and west of A1A. This seems peculiar, unless possibly there is some large property that the Commissioners have purposely decided to avoid.

4. The Commissioners' supposed finding of fact ("improper use . . . of fertilizers containing nitrogen cause . . . overgrowth of vegetation in natural and artificial watercourses and basins . . . increasing flooding . . . and . . . damage to the natural environment") is sometimes true, but it is such a general statement that it may or may not apply specifically to the Guana State Park.

5. Since the Commissioners state that "soil science professionals

[recognize that] use of slow release . . . nitrogen sources acts to minimize harmful nitrate leaching, why don't they ask the soil science professionals if this ordinance would help the Guana Basin? Even the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods recommends keeping water soluble nitrogen sources down to 30%, but does not say to avoid their use altogether.

A classic study of nutrient loading involving runoff from turf areas was Matraw, H.C., Jr., and Sherwood, C.B. 1977. Quality of stormwater runoff from a residential area, Broward County, Florida: U.S. Geological Survey, Journal of Research, v. 5, no. 6, p. 823-824. Basically they showed relatively low nitrates in runoff, and the biggest problem was coliform bacteria from domestic pets and naturalized Muscovy ducks.

State and Federal agencies are falling all over themselves to develop management plans for protecting coastal estuaries. This is basically healthy. Because of the sensitivity of estuaries and their economic and natural value, these are programs generally deserving support by all natural resource managers, including turfgrass professionals.

But considering the vast amount of work done at the state and federal level, to develop organized coastal management plans based on sound research and basin-wide knowledge of nutrient loadings, it is shocking that a small county commission would pass such a sweeping ordinance apparently without a shred of data to show that it would do any good.

Don't everybody write at once to the *St. Augustine Record* or to the County Commission. (That would be rather difficult because they apparently don't even have a web site.) When more information becomes available, it will be posted on TurfTalk-Digest.

This bad ordinance is just an

example of what can happen sometimes when people meaning to do the right thing look for quick fixes.

PHIL BUSEY, PH.D.
UF/IFAS Ft. Lauderdale

Don't Point Fingers... Point Out Facts

I hope that all of the people concerned about the St. John's fertilizer ordinance attended the FTGA's one day seminars where Dr. John Cisar spoke on his recent work with St. Augustinegrass.

He showed that turf fertilized with 6 lb N/1000 sq. ft./year did not have significant nitrate leaching; levels were at 1 ppm or less. This was done on a sloped area, and confirms what university trials have shown throughout the United States: Turf is an excellent environmental buffer between us and our groundwater. Turf is part of the solution, not part of the problem.

As the vice president of FTGA, and a technical manager for the largest lawn care company in existence, I would like to point out that FTGA lobbies for all of the greens industry. Our members include golf courses, lawn care companies, sod producers, and people servicing sports fields.

Also, please note that golf courses are not exempt from the St. John's ordinance! Only greens are exempt. Fairways, tees, and roughs still must comply with the ordinance. It is very important not to point fingers at other segments of the industry. When

properly managed, all turfgrass has environmental plusses, and we need to be proud of our industry.

ERICA SANTELLA
District Manager
TruGreen-Chemlawn

Fertilizer Ordinance is Really No Surprise

I am not surprised that an ordinance was passed limiting the use of soluble nitrogen and phosphorous, but I am surprised that the first ordinance of this kind came from St. Johns County.

I know that the EPA, Fla. DEP, the water management districts in Florida and throughout the country are struggling with this same issue: nutrient loading of waterways and the side effects of those nutrients. We don't have to look far to see some of the symptoms, Everglades, Lake Apopka, Indian River Lagoon, and Lake Okeechobee. Nationally, Chesapeake Bay, rivers in South Carolina and dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico have problems in which nutrient loading of waterways is suspected.

But why is St. Johns County deciding to do something about it? Why just lawns? Why not golf courses and agriculture also? What should we as turf grass managers do about it? (*Ed. Note: Only golf course greens are exempt from the ordinance.*)

St. Johns County is probably the last coastal county to experience major growth in Florida. As a result of being last, they have the luxury of learning

from everyone else's mistakes. Perhaps they are looking at the growth to the north and further south and what it has done to the natural environments and believe that prevention of a problem may be cheaper than paying to fix a problem.

Don't write off St. Johns County as a

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Why do some superintendents support the Florida Turfgrass Association and others do not?

Let me state that I am a golf course superintendent, first, last, and always, and have been for the entire 26½ years since my graduation from the University of Florida. I have been a member of FTGA since 1972, a member of GCSAA since 1977, and a founding member of both the Central Florida and Palm Beach chapters. I am the current president of

the FTGA and a past president of both the Palm Beach and the Florida Golf Course Superintendent Associations. Reciting my professional history, I hope, will give some credibility to the logic I employ in urging superintendents to support the FTGA.

The simple reason is that supporting the FTGA is the most practical way for Florida superintendents to help themselves. "Think globally

and act locally" applies more to Florida than any other state. Florida has a unique environment among the 50 states, and research done out of state may not be applicable to Florida conditions. While there are a few states that have strong and viable university turfgrass programs supported by strong and active industries, most do not, and many university turf programs are scaling back and deteriorating due to lack of support.

The University of Florida turfgrass program, on the other hand, is expanding as a direct response to our interest, support, and activism. It makes more sense for superintendents in other states to throw their support solely behind GCSAA or other large regional programs, just as it makes more sense for us to strongly support the University of Florida turfgrass program.

With more golf courses than any other state and nearly the most acreage of turfgrasses, Florida outstrips all the states in terms of potential. If we could just harness this potential, we could satisfy all our research requirements in

state, assuring their validity to our conditions. This does not mean we should not support the GCSAA and its initiatives; it just means that it is more likely that we will get useful and relevant research working with Florida scientists than it does sending our money out of state and hoping it may come back one day to help us. Let's be very selective about the types of programs we send our hard-earned money to outside the state of Florida.

So why work with non-golf turfgrass professionals? Again, the answer is practicality.

Besides research, education, and fellowship with peers, the other reason we bind together in associations is to have some influence with lawmakers. GCSAA is looking out for us on national issues. At the state level, we have to look out for ourselves, and when dealing with lawmakers and politicians, size does matter! We have a much bigger stick when we are aligned with the other turfgrass professionals like lawn care companies, sports turf managers, and sod producers, parks and cemeteries and pest control companies than we do as a very small group of Florida golf course superintendents.

Doesn't this sometimes result in conflicts of interest, or dilution of superintendents' efforts? I've sometimes used the expression "wearing two hats" when talking about my service to either the FGCSA or the FTGA, but I now regard this as a mistake, as some people have interpreted this to mean that there may be a conflict of interest in regards to actions taken or decisions made.

There is no conflict of interest, and I see no potential conflict of interest of any significance in the future, as we work to strengthen our ties with non-golf turfgrass professionals through the FTGA. Superintendent concerns are not compromised, but instead are enhanced and given greater chance of success by working with turfgrass professionals in related fields. Yes, disagreements about the best course of action to take for the benefit of all FTGA members can and will occur, but no more so than currently occurs among the superintendent members of the FGCSA board of directors. Intelligent and

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Getting the Big Picture

Mark My Words



Mark Jarrell, CGCS
President
Florida Turfgrass
Association

ORDINANCE

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backwoods, good ol' boy network. The county crafted some ordinances such as the anti-nudity ordinance which have stood the test of the courts, and have been utilized by other counties as templates in creating their own similar ordinances. I assure you, whether this ordinance passes or not, other county governments will be considering similar measures to deal with their local problems.

So why did they single out lawns? Well, at this time agriculture is exempt from much and the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association is one of the most powerful agricultural lobbies in the country. The GCSAA and the FTGA in recent years have presented an impressive showing and shown golf courses in a positive light. Audubon International and its certified golfcourses are showing everyone that golf courses are becoming sustainable habitats for both wildlife and man. So if you can't touch agriculture, and golf courses are the friends of nature,

The turfgrass industry will not survive into the future as it has in the past. Either you can do your part to improve the industry and its practices, or you can sit back and watch it be taken away.

then homeowners must be polluting everything, right? Not!

How many turf managers are concerned about the quality of water leaving their property? Do we test our water for nitrogen and phosphorous loading? Have we amended our practices when applying fertilizers to prevent it from reaching water bodies? Do we even know if we are part of the problem?

Suppose there are 1200 golf courses in Florida (the number changes daily, it seems). Of those 1200, 295 (24.58%) are enrolled in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary and Signature Programs. Of those, only 47 (3.91%) are certified.

What about the rest?

One of the key components of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program is water quality. Test your water to see if you are impairing the quality of the water leaving your property, and then do something about it. If you do not have proof that you are not impairing the quality of the water, what is going to stop them from taking your fertilizer away next?

The turfgrass industry will not survive into the future as it has in the past. Either you can do your part to improve the industry and its practices, or you can sit back and watch it be taken away. Be thankful if you are not in this part of St. Johns County, but this or something similar is soon coming to a neighborhood near you!

TOM STONE, CGCS

President, Nature Golf, Inc.

JARRELL

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dedicated professionals usually know more than one way to skin a cat.

I have yet to see an issue before the FTGA board that pitted one segment of the turfgrass industry against the other; but I have seen issues where a cooperative effort, and/or the actions of non-golf turf professionals, have resulted in a benefit to the golf course industry. Examples include FTGA Vice President Erica Santella of TruGreen-Chemlawn representing us at nitrate leaching workshops and posting/ notification hearings; FTGA Director Tom Benefield looking out for our

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water interests; Emerald Island Turf

feeding us all at field days and various other supplier members serving on committees and working in the trenches for the good of all.

As for research funding, each group comprising FTGA membership realizes that they exert control over how their donations are used. Money raised by a superintendent chapter is not going to fund a soccer field hardness study or any other non-golf related project unless the superintendents request it.

Superintendents give up nothing by supporting the FTGA, but stand to gain a lot. We have a unique opportunity in Florida to set the standards for the rest of the country — let's take advantage of it!

I get tired of hearing the argument that some clubs can't afford for their superintendents to join associations or participate in conferences, trade shows and attend meetings. How does \$187.50 a month sound? Anybody can find ways to work the budget to find \$187.50 a month. Here's why they should:

Where else can a golf club get (1) subscriptions to three turf management magazines, two newsletters, monthly bulletins

for owners (even if associations have been providing them for free as a service to the industry); (2) access to endless resource materials for labor issues, training, communications, media relations and any other topic you need help with; (3) consulting services on personnel issues like hiring, harassment, payroll/labor laws, family leave, overtime and terminations; (4) political representation in

Tallahassee and Washington on issues like water use permits, pesticide surveillance programs, OSHA, ADA, FQPA, Clean Waters Act, Clean Air Act, Immigrant Labor and a host of others; (5) access to monthly meetings, education speakers and peer networking; (6) access to state and national conferences and trade show where all the suppliers, educators, researchers and allied industry experts gather to share knowledge of products, services and good old one on one problem solving; (7) support for turf research which solves your turf management problems which make your members happy and your job easier?

Let's put a price tag on it! You get all this and more for about \$510 a year. That's \$42.50 a month. Any club can afford that. OK! That's just your up-front cost to belong to the three most significant associations in your professional life: the FGCSA (\$100 average)/GCSAA (\$250) and the FTGA (\$160). I put a slash between the FGCSA and GCSAA because its a dual membership deal. If you join one you have to join

the other. You don't like that? See that list up above? All those services which help and protect you and your club's interests take funding.

Here's the rest of the deal. Don't just be a checkbook member. Go to meetings and participate. If you attend monthly meetings of your local chapter, figure an average of \$40 for meeting, lunch and golf. Skip golf if you have to and save some money, but go get the education and talk to your peers about problems. Isn't it worth \$25 to talk to the best consultants around? Say you make six meetings a year and play golf each time. That's \$240 per year. Still not sure? Go at least once a quarter. That's \$160 per year.

Next item is conferences and trade shows. You can argue till the cows come home about the value of going to the GCSAA and/or the FTGA events each year. If your time and budget permits, then go to both. There will be a wealth of *new* information at each event. If you go to the GCSAA show and plan wisely, you can figure about \$1,000 to \$1,500 for a four- to five-day stay. That would include taking several college-level seminars, the no-fee general sessions and the trade show. You can make it a weekend or a week. It's your call.

If you can't get away to the national event, then by all means don't miss the FTGA conference and show. Registration, education, trade show and a one- or two-night stay might run \$500.

OK! Let's total up the damage: \$510 in dues, \$240 for meetings, (let's go big) \$1,500 for conference and show. The grand total is \$2,250 or \$187.50 per month on a budget line item. There isn't a club in the world that can't afford \$187.50 a month to have all the local, state and national turf management resources at your fingertips.

That doesn't count the intangible effects of a club showing support for its superintendent. There's always something new to be learned that results in better playing conditions and/or lowered costs. Both scenarios help offset the \$2,250 spent for dues, education and travel.

Show me a better bargain if you can. For \$187.50 a month you get all the services, resources and information you need to keep your golf course superintendent and your golf course on track for success. You can't afford not to do it!

The Best Bargain in Town

Green Side Up



Joel Jackson, CGCS
Editor