



Ordinance 'Exemptions' Don't Mean 'Free Pass'

GREEN SIDE UP BY JOEL JACKSON, CGCS

Golf courses have been very fortunate in the first round of local ordinances that have been passed this year. Beginning with Sanibel Island and Sarasota County – and other entities that have adopted similar versions of those two – golf courses are usually listed in a section titled “Exemptions.”

But don't stop reading there.

Because what “Exemption” means is that golf courses are exempt from the rules that have been put in place for fertilizing home lawns. They are not exempt however from adhering to some sort of nutrient-management guidelines. Those guidelines are contained in the Best Management Practices for Enhancing Water Quality on Florida Golf Courses (BMPs). The Golf BMP manual was published in January and has been sent to every golf course for which the FGCSA has an address. If you don't have one, give us a call.

There are specific limits on the amount of nitrogen and phosphorous that can be applied per application and per year, based on the north, central and southern climatic zones in Florida. These limits were based on Dr. Jerry Sartain's

research over the years at the University of Florida. His recommendations give a pretty good range of nutrient amounts, but of course each site has its specific needs. If special needs arise, you must document the soil and/or tissue test results that indicate you need to apply more than the amount allowable in the BMPs.

This means keeping accurate and complete sample records. If there is a fish kill or an algae bloom that gets someone's attention and the fertilizer police or local environmental protection agency comes knocking, you had better have your BMPs in order and not just gathering dust on the bookshelf.

The state and local governments are serious about addressing the possible impacts of nutrient leaching and runoff from fertilizer use. We can argue 'til the cows come home on whether the nutrients applied correctly to turfgrass ever leave the site in amounts that could do any harm to the environment. Non-point sources are hard to identify.

The N and P in your golf course ponds might be coming from the streets and storm drains in the

development surrounding your golf course. Or is it from your own fertilizer and fertigation operations? Do you observe reasonable setbacks from water bodies when spreading fertilizer or do you get as close to the lake as you can?

Check out the BMP sections that talk about applying fertilizer and about lake management. The city or county is holding you to those BMPs. They are not giving you a free pass to conduct business as fits your whim. They are no longer voluntary guidelines when they have been cited in a local law or ordinance.

I suggest you take a serious look at the checklist in the back of the BMP manual and begin to check off the things you are already doing and get a head start in figuring out your BMP scorecard and thinking about those practical, affordable things you can do, or verify that you are doing them already.

Folks, this issue isn't going away. Once the state fertilizer rule is written and adopted by the Legislature, many more cities and counties will likely enact that rule as their fertilizer ordinance. The goal of the Fertilizer Task Force is to have one consistent, statewide rule so businesses can operate efficiently across jurisdictional lines.

There will still be contentious times ahead as some of the early ordinances, while based primarily on science and BMPs, still have unscientific clauses like summertime “black-out” periods that say no fertilizer containing N and P can be

applied. No feeding during the growing season isn't logical from an agronomic point of view, but proponents equate rainfall with certain fertilizer runoff. Unfortunately, it may be up to a court to decide down the road.

Don't be surprised if, in the not-too-distant future, we are not asked to sign up or pledge to follow the BMPs as a matter of course to demonstrate environmental responsibility. Some industries like the Forestry Association have had BMPs for many years now and they do an annual survey to see how many people are abiding by their BMPs.

As I said, the environmental issue isn't going away and we must come up with a practical, rational and fair way to document the golf course industry's willing participation in efforts to manage our golf courses in a responsible way. We took more than two years to hammer out the Golf BMP Manual to create reasonable, science-based guidelines for golf course maintenance operations that would satisfy agronomic, economic and political requirements.

Now is the time for everyone to really start walking the talk. Effective BMPs are evolving guidelines based on the best and newest science available. If your course wants to stay in business and be competitive in this era of all things green and sustainable, remember the BMP Manual isn't a free pass, it's the How-To book of the future.