

TURF WARS



FTGA VIEWS



BY PETE SNYDER

The turfgrass industry has been under attack from environmental activists for over a decade. But it has only been in the past few years that the attack has been most direct.

Activists may be well-intentioned, but they are misinformed about the benefits of healthy, well-managed turf. Their attacks are mostly emotional and lack scientific validity.

The Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) has offered “science” that activists have promoted. But TBEP science relies on questionable statistical modeling that lacks independent peer review. TBEP and activists advocate a four-month summer ban of all residential fertilizer applications, which scientific studies have shown will be counterproductive.

In 2008, activist groups sued the EPA, saying that it had not done enough to protect the state’s waterways, citing algae blooms as a result. The EPA settled the lawsuit by signing a consent decree to set legal limits for nutrients (primarily

phosphorous and nitrogen) in Florida waterways. The EPA held a series of public hearings and will soon announce the limits, called Numeric Nutrient Criteria.

The prospect of one-size-fits-all NNC across the State has generated widespread opposition from numerous stakeholders, but the limits will come. Significantly, the onus will be on local municipalities to comply, which has left many of them looking for answers.

Last year, the state legislature tried to bring clarity to water issues through the passage of Senate Bill 494. The bill includes a model fertilizer ordinance that specifies amount, timing and certifications required for fertilizer applications. The ordinance also requires scientific documentation and approval by FDEP, IFAS and FDACS for adoption of local ordinances that are more stringent than the State model.

Until recently the turfgrass industry believed peer-reviewed science, BMP’s and SB494 would suffice. Unfortunately this has not been the case.

Activists have campaigned for adoption of the TBEP proposal. And the Tampa Bay Policy Board (which is composed of environmental protection officials from Pinellas, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco and Polk Counties, plus the municipalities within these counties) has pledged support for the four-month ban.

It appears that the bans are going forward despite the fact that peer-reviewed science indicates the bans

will do more harm to the environment than good. The bans are going forward despite the concerns of FDACS, FDEP and IFAS. The bans are going forward based on emotion, political expediency and the threat that activists will campaign against any opposition.

So, what will happen when these bans don’t work? What next? What new municipalities (activists are working all over the state); what additional inputs (pesticides? water? sod varieties?); and what new industry sectors will be next? Golf is exempt from the new ordinances “for now.” Activist objectives are clear, “Turf is a dinosaur that needs to be encouraged into extinction,” said one of the group’s leaders.

Beyond aesthetics, healthy turf is nature’s best filter. Weakened turf is more prone to disease, weeds and other pests. Studies show that poor turf quality can result in lower real estate values. It can also adversely impact surface play, which in turn can decrease a club’s income from lower green fees, and less spent on merchandise and food and beverage.

The industry must act now. It must show solidarity and support residential fertilizer applications, which is our first line of defense. As the umbrella association representing all industry sectors, the FTGA needs the support of all industry participants, not just a few. The FTGA needs money to carry on the fight, and it needs size to enhance our standing in Tallahassee.

The industry must change the dialogue and the debate. We all want safe,

quality water. So we need to show our concern through ongoing environmental stewardship; embracing sound, peer-reviewed science. Our opponents are emotionally-charged activists who seek change they cannot substantiate. We should counter with our emotion over lost jobs and revenues that they have caused and we can substantiate, but we also must keep clean water as our primary objective.

Finally, the industry must build a war chest to fund research and education. The FTGA has proposed to create “environmental assessments” for those industry sectors that are under attack. In this way fertilizer, pesticides, irrigation equipment, enhanced turf varieties and other industry inputs can fund a unified response to activist actions.

Under the proposal each industry input would be asked to pay a small environmental assessment... less than one-half of one percent of product sales. Half of the assessment would be retained in the corresponding industry sector, and the other half would go to a larger industry-wide fund that is collaboratively managed.

As adherents to the scientific method, we in the industry need more research. Research is our ally. Education is our tool. We need to be sure that we are educating industry participants so we can continually improve our craft. We need education to reach out to policy makers. And we need to educate the general population that healthy, well-managed turf provides many environmental benefits.