



LANDSCAPE AND
LAWN CARE PROS
MUST ADJUST
THEIR APPLICATION
PROGRAMS TO
COMPLY WITH AN
INCREASING NUM-
BER OF REGULATIONS
AIMED AT REDUCING
NITROGEN AND
PHOSPHORUS IN
STREAMS, LAKES
AND BAYS

BY CURT HARLER

FERTILITY IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL

Smart landscape contractors making the move to package billing are finding it pays to reduce trips and rely on performance rather than showing up time and again to do the same basic job. This is especially true regarding fertilization because several states and regional water authorities, over objections by the industry, have laws restricting applications.

Those in states where contractors haven't yet been forced to make the change may soon see guidelines or regulations that require them to rethink their fertilizer strategies. Indeed, they may be mandated to apply the required fertilizer to the lawn in fewer trips and within the legal window for the regional authority.

This past summer on the Gulf Coast of Florida, nitrogen fertilizer use was almost completely prohibited. Less is often best, maintains the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD). The Tampa Bay area moved to follow in those footsteps, with Pinellas County drafting regulations that prohibited fertilizer application in the rainy months and requiring use of slow-release materials.

"Our basic direction to landscape professionals is to get the Florida Best Management Principles certificate," says Mary Beth Henry, commercial horticulture specialist with the Hillsborough County Extension office.

A law passed in June now requires everyone applying fertilizer to pass the

BMP course. The 6-hour program includes a pretest, post-test, and a passing 75% grade. Everyone pushing a spreader, not just supervisory personnel, must pass.

With fertilizer, it's simply sound agronomic practice, whether in the North or the South, to fertilize grass only during the active growing season, which includes root growth in the fall, even when top growth has slowed, claims Henry.

Florida's BMPs limit the use of nitrogen to one pound per 1,000 sq. ft. of slow-release material. If it's not slow release, then the limit is one-half pound. Application timing varies by region of the state, and the local recommendations even vary by grass variety.

Local ordinances might be more stringent than the BMPs. If a contractor is operating in an area, he has to follow the local ordinance, Henry says. Sarasota is one case in which the regulations are quite restrictive to amount applied and timing. The proposed Pinellas County rules, for example, will require 50% slow-release nitrogen by June 2010.

SWFWMD suggests contractors use iron instead of nitrogen if they want to green-up a lawn, a practice that is not universally accepted by university researchers.

In every case, however, agronomists generally agree it's a good idea to postpone any fertilizer application if a heavy rain is predicted.

turf can receive as much as a pound per year. If, however, a contractor has a soil test or leaf tissue test that calls for extra P2O5, it can be applied to invigorate grass growth.

All of this supposedly is better for the environment, but what about business?

Obviously, contractors that have built their operations providing multiple applications of fertilizer to clients' properties, while also delivering other related services, strongly disagree with many of these provisions, especially those limiting the number of applications they can make.

Their contention is that they apply fertilizers and other materials responsibly, and provide a valuable environmental service in doing so.

Policy makers charged with making fertilizer rules respond that by reducing the number of fertilizer applications, a contractor benefits by making fewer trips to each property. Those who market their services intelligently promote the idea their services are green, protect the local watershed, save fuel and keep

customers' lawns healthier longer.

This means a contractor has to tweak his sales philosophy, emphasizing packages of aeration, fertilization, pest control, leaf and needle blowing, for example.

Chesapeake Bay woes

Along with sediments, the Chesapeake Bay area's biggest pollutants are nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus, says the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), which has offices in the states of Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

"We have too much nitrogen around here," claims Marcy Damon, grassroots restoration coordinator for the CBF.

Damon suggests starting any fertilizer application two ways: First, with a soil test before applying any materials, and second, reducing the amount of turfgrass on properties.

Measures aimed at reducing the amount of turfgrass, especially where environmental conditions favor its growth, rankle the industry. The landscape industry, with university research

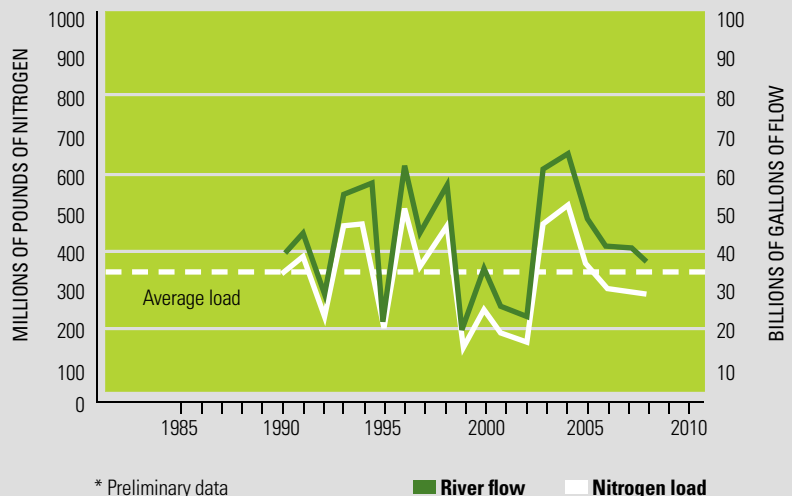
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Making it work

The key to reducing the number of fertilizer applications is to use the appropriate material – something with slow release that will last a long time, Henry says. Regulatory agencies favor the use of slow-release fertilizers to make nitrogen and phosphorus available to the turf throughout an extended period. This can include organic fertilizers and composts, neither of which face restrictions on their use. They're kinder to the environment and are usually more cost-effective, according to the SWFWMD.

Everywhere in the state there's a limit of a half-pound of phosphorus per year on established turf. It must be split in two or more applications of a quarter-pound or less. Newly established

NITROGEN LOADS REACHING CHESAPEAKE BAY*



"We have enough phosphorus for most turf in the state, anyway."

— **MARY BETH HENRY**, COMMERCIAL HORTICULTURE SPECIALIST
WITH THE HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY, FL, EXTENSION

supporting it, insists that restricting turfgrass is the wrong direction to go in reducing runoff into streams, bays and lakes. Properly fertilized and maintained turfgrass — i. e. healthy turfgrass — captures and mitigates runoff and its associated pollutants, they insist.

Whatever is applied, Damon encourages contractors to refrain from water-soluble synthetics and use slow-release materials. She also recommends contractors avoid combination products that contain fertilizer and pest controls, another sore point with application companies.

Other measures being promoted by the CBF align more closely with the interests and practices of most Green Industry contractors, if not on specifics at least on practices.

'On established turf, raising mower heights will help grass thrive,' Damon says.

"The minimum should be 3-in. tall," she adds. "You'll develop better roots, and the grass won't brown as quickly. Plus, tall grass shades out weeds."

Another sound practice is not over applying fertilizer. While it may pay off in short-term profits, it'll leave the lawn more susceptible to diseases and won't be good for the landscaping business in the long run.

Client education

It's a good idea to show customers the results of the soil test — most state universities offer an inexpensive service — conducted on their lawns.

"Without that, you have no idea what you are doing," Damon says.

On the days when fertilizer is applied, it's a good idea to sweep or blow any fertilizer on sidewalks or driveways back onto the grass, or put it back in the hopper and use it elsewhere.

Wherever a contractor is working, it's a good idea to leave a 10-foot strip along the margin of a creek, pond or other body of water. This buffer zone keeps fertilizer out of the water.

Florida laws vary on water setbacks.

"BMPs say that if you have a deflector on one side of the spreader you can get as close as three feet from the water — without a shield it's 10 feet," Henry says.

This, too, varies by municipality, even within counties. Some Florida towns recommend a low-maintenance zone of six to 10 feet along any water.

Damon also advocates leaving turf clippings on the lawn. This

recycles some nitrogen back into the turfgrass roots, she says.

All of this will require some change of thinking by contractors and customers, she adds. It likely will have to start with the contractor explaining the benefits of an environmentally sensitive program for a customer's lawn and area watersheds. Odds are most customers never have given a passing thought to the question. **LM**

HARLER is an experienced Green Industry editor who lives and works in Strongsville, OH. Contact him at curt@curtharler.com

SMARTER TURF FERTILITY

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company's fertility program.

"We told our customers they're getting a better product for the same money," he says. "We explained they're going to get better results because some of the nitrogen in the product is going to be there waiting to go to work for their lawns in the spring. We also explained the beneficial environmental aspects of it, in terms of runoff. That's big here because of the Chesapeake Bay."

By using a fertilizer with a longer release of nutrients, his employees have been able to spend more time monitoring and offering IPM services to property owners rather than returning with a spreader each visit.

In some cases, Scientific Plant Services makes just a single application of fertilizer plus Barricade pre-emergent herbicide for its larger accounts (commercial properties, college grounds and apartment complexes) and still sees great results.

Mays is able to dial in the nutrient-release capabilities of the polycoated fertilizer he needs for each round by using a special computer program offered by the manufacturer. Heading into the fall, Mays is looking at four different formulations and will select the one he believes will deliver best results as he gets a better read of fall and winter weather conditions.

"Everybody's accepted the changes we made and so far everybody's been happy with the color and the performance of their lawns," he says.

Lawn and landscape contractors agree fertility is the cornerstone and the starting point of what's developed into their robust and profitable service industry. As one grinning lawn service owner said at a recent industry conference: "We get paid to grow it (turfgrass). Then we get paid to mow it. What a great business to be in!" **LM**