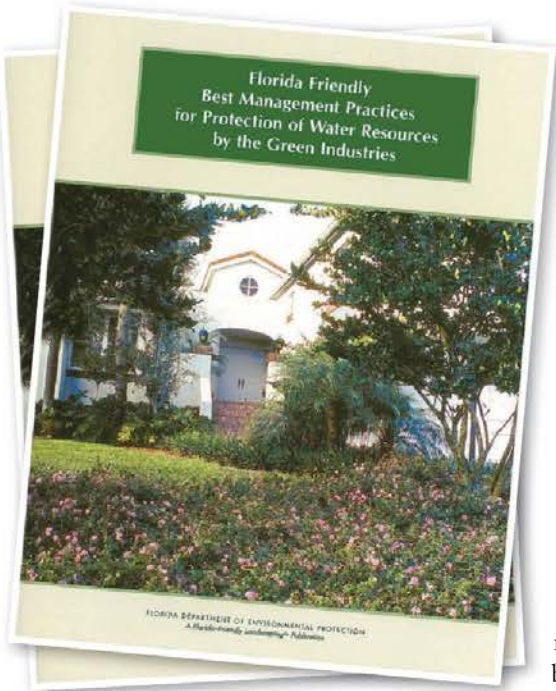


LAWN/TREE CARE

# Learning from Florida

Five tips for dealing with state and local fertilizer regulations. *By* MARISA PALMIERI



**D**uring the last few decades, Florida's water quality has worsened due to a variety of factors like urbanization, development and population growth. According to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the state's surface and ground waters have faced excessive nutrient loading due to nonpoint source pollution. This issue has turned Florida into a hotbed of fertilizer regulatory activities, says Don Rainey, the state coordinator for the Florida-Friendly Landscaping Green Industries Best Management Practices Program (GI-BMPs).

"It is far easier and less expensive to minimize the amount of nutrients that get into our waters than it is to treat stormwater and other nonpoint sources of pollution to remove nutrients," Rainey says.

Rainey spoke at *Landscape Management's* inaugural Lawn Care Forum, held early last month at Reunion Resort near Orlando (for more on this event, see page 6). His talk relayed to the national audience of lawn care operators the importance of taking a proactive stance toward working with officials and the public when fertilizer regulations pop up in other states.

In Florida, fertilizer rules vary widely by jurisdiction; they include restrictions on the use of fertilizers containing nitrogen and phosphorus during certain times of the year, requirements for non-fertilized buffer zones and mandates for education and certification. For landscape companies, the restrictions pose challenges, such as keeping up to date on the patchwork of rules and policies, meeting training requirements and more.

"It's still too early to tell if fertilization ordinances have a direct effect on water quality," Rainey says. "But local ordinances continue to pop up, and from what I gather, they're going to continue."

With that in mind, he offered the following tips for the lawn care industry to remember when it's facing regulatory burdens.

**1 The industry must be organized.** In Florida, for example, when the public outcry over nutrient loading began pointing fingers at the landscape industry, an ad hoc group of professionals got together and said, "We're

not going to be the problem." They put together a manual (pictured) for Green Industry professionals to use voluntarily as a guideline to minimize nonpoint source pollution when establishing new landscapes and caring for existing ones.

**2 Informed decisions must be based on science.** On the local level, it's easy for the loudest voices to draw the most attention, whether or not their claims are based on facts and research. That's why when Florida Green Industry professionals partnered with state agencies and The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to write their best practices manual, they based recommendations on common sense, science and research only.

**3 A holistic educational approach is required.** Education is a necessary component, and in Florida there is a three-pronged approach that reaches out to homeowners and builders/developers through the Florida-Friendly Landscaping, Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program and to Green Industry professionals through the GI-BMPs training program. Additionally, starting Jan. 1, 2014, Florida law will require all commercial fertilizer applicators to have limited commercial fertilizer applicator certificates that they'll have to renew every four years.

**4 Include measurable outcomes and impacts.** It's difficult for officials to measure improvements, Rainey says, noting it took decades of gradual water quality degradation to get to where it is today. Still, Rainey says, baselines are important to measure effectiveness. Otherwise, there's no way to know whether restrictions are doing any good.

**5 Include follow-up "sunset" provisions.** Landscape professionals with a seat at the table on regulatory discussions should recommend that state and local officials revisit certain regulations several years down the road to refine or remove provisions based on new research.