

**T**he headline in your local newspaper reads something like this: "Water Quality in Local (Lake, River or Bay) Near Toxic Levels — (Humans, Fish, Birds, Shellfish or Sea Grass Beds) Could be at Risk." The story's lead sentence goes on to say:

*Ms. Jane Doe, from the Save the (Lake, River or Bay) Committee, said that record algae blooms in the local (lake, river or bay) resulted from:*

1) *dumping high nutrient wastewater from municipal and industrial treatment plants.*

2) *the high volume of natural organic debris such as leaves, blossoms, seeds, pollen, migrating waterfowl feces and feeder creeks cutting through organic rich soils.*

3) *run-off and leaching of fertilizers used on lawns and golf courses.*

Based on your experience with media coverage of environmental activists and issues, which conclusion above do you think will most likely be cited as the cause of the pollution?

If you picked No. 1, then you're probably an employee of the St. Johns River Water Management District in northeast Florida, or you read the article "Battling Algae" in the organization's December 2005 newsletter "Streamlines," which covered the huge algae blooms in the lower St. Johns River last summer. The article said, and I quote, "While staff said some nutrients might come from agriculture and lawns, the overwhelming cause of nutrient loading was from municipal and industrial water-treatment plants." The article described the poor quality of the water from the outmoded facilities along the river, but you never read that in the headlines.

If you picked No. 2, you might be from Minnesota and Wisconsin, where homeowners and golf courses took the blame for high phosphorus content in their water bodies. A phosphorus ban was initially instituted for all except agriculture (not throwing stones but guess who uses most of the 154 million tons of fertilizer annually in the United States?). Superintendents can take a one-day class and become certified phosphorus applicators, so not all is lost, but the misperception lives on.

In one nutrient-loading study done by the

## Fighting Politics and Perceptions

BY JOEL JACKSON



ONCE POLITICAL  
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University of Minnesota, it was discovered that the nutrient loading in a local lake was reduced by 42 percent when the streets were swept once a week during the fall leaf season. Down in North Carolina, a study of a local urban lake found that the migrating waterfowl were fouling the lake with phosphorus to the tune of 27 percent.

From media accounts, you would think John Q. Public was burying his yard under tons of fertilizer. But according to a study done by the The Scotts Co.: Of the 80 million home lawns maintained by homeowners, 40 million apply no fertilizer, 18 million apply it once per year, and 10 million apply it twice per year. That leaves 1 million applying 3 times a year and another million applying 4 times a year and 10 million lawns being maintained by lawn care companies. So 85 percent of the lawns are on subsistent fertilization while 15 percent are more closely following university recommendations for healthy lawns. But you never see that in the headlines either.

A regulator recently told me that it's difficult to stop a political action once it's motivated. Regulators must take some action to satisfy the noise-makers. But since they can't stop Mother Nature from her nutrient loading, they go after the product in the bag, which is an easy target. And if they get manufacturers to sell 16-2-8 instead of 16-4-8, then they have reduced phosphorus by 50 percent by decree, even if homeowners do use less than 2 percent of the fertilizer applied each year.

If you picked No. 3, you're living in my world. Since you will be held accountable anyway, you should be politically and scientifically correct. Remember the four "Rs" of fertilizing: Right Product, Right Place, Right Time and Right Rate.

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