

Fertilizer and Pesticide Use Restrictions: Coming to California?

By Michael Blankinship

Introduction

It's no secret that fertilizers, especially those high in phosphorus and nitrogen, aid all plant growth—from turf grass to weeds. Several states have passed legislation in the past six years to reduce the amount of fertilizer (especially phosphorus) entering waterways that can cause an explosion of aquatic plant growth.

Fertilizers high in phosphorus are popular amongst homeowners that may use the “a little is good, but more is better” philosophy. Unfortunately, it is easy for the public to point fingers at golf course superintendents when it comes to explaining why an algal bloom or aquatic weed infestation has occurred. For example, a homeowner may be oblivious to heavy rain or watering schedules that may cause their fertilizer to runoff into lakes and waterways.

Such fertilizer restrictions have not yet been imposed in California. Here are a few examples of the actions other states have taken to limit fertilizer use:

Minnesota as a Catalyst

Unintentionally fertilizing aquatic weeds and algae via non-point source (NPS) runoff can create aquatic weed overgrowth. This mass of plants when decomposing can leave little oxygen for fish and other aquatic animals. To combat these “dead zones” in lakes, Minnesota became the first state to restrict the sale of phosphorus fertilizers for use on turf in 2005.

Under Minnesota's law, a typical lawn fertilizer must have 0% phosphorus. Newly planted lawns within their first year and turf tested to be phosphorus-deficient are the only exceptions to this restriction. Golf courses are permitted to use phosphorus fertilizers only when directed by an individual licensed or certified by a commissioner-approved organization.

Several other states bordering the Great Lakes soon followed suit. New York, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan have all passed similar laws restricting the sale of high-phosphorus fertilizers for only damaged or very young lawns.

Beyond the Great Lakes

Phosphorus and occasionally nitrogen are under fire elsewhere in the United States. Recently in Sanibel Island, FL, for example, high nitrogen in Tarpon Bay has implicated the local golf course. Florida has limited the sale of fertilizers containing phosphorus to low- or no-phosphorus mixtures. Additionally, cities and counties in Florida have passed strict laws regarding phosphorus and nitrogen use.

More recently, Virginia and Washington have strengthened laws on phosphorus use. Both states had previously banned laundry and dishwasher detergents containing phosphorus. In early 2011, Virginia and Washington passed legislation to take effect in 2013 that restricts the sale of phosphorus for turf for only “new” or “damaged” lawns.

Will California Follow?

Currently, California has not banned detergents containing phosphorus, which in other states has served as a regulatory stepping stone to fertilizer use restrictions. The fact that several states outside of the Great Lakes area have passed laws to restrict fertilizer use makes one wonder if California could be next. Stay tuned. Joining the following email lists will help you stay up to date:

<http://www.cdca.ca.gov/is/fflders/fertilizer.html>

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/resources/email_subscriptions/pressreleases_subscribe.shtml

About the Author: Michael Blankinship is a 10-year GCSAA member, a DPR licensed pest control advisor and a registered professional civil engineer in California. His Davis-based consulting firm solves problems related to permitting, compliance, water quality and natural resource management throughout the Western U.S.

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Pesticide Use Restrictions in California Counties

Three California Counties, Marin, San Francisco and Santa Clara, have created local pesticide use ordinances to reduce or eliminate pesticide use on county lands.

Where Marin and Santa Clara have created lists of approved pesticides for use, the City and County of San Francisco has simply banned Toxicity Category I and II pesticides, along with any that may cause cancer or reproductive or developmental harm. In all three counties, applicators can file for exemptions to these restrictions.

The ordinances also require posting signs to notify the public of pesticide applications. These are to include information such as the signal word, name and active ingredient in the pesticides, the date of the application, the target pest, and contact information for the entity applying the pesticide. The signs, must be posted at the site 3-4 days prior and 4 days after an application.

If you supervise a golf course on county land (or if your course leases the land from the county), these regulations may apply to you. Marin County will help entities create their own plan when they require intricate and continuous pest management solutions—like golf courses.

Timeline: When Did States Restrict Phosphorus Fertilizer Use?

