

1/21/09

Hello out there!

I'm hearing a certain level of panic about coming fertilizer ordinances. Take a deep breath nothing has become official in Hillsborough County yet ...

What's Happening with Fertilizer Ordinances?

A potential ordinance was discussed at the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission meeting this past Thursday. I happened to find out about the meeting at the last minute and was able to be there.

The head of UF Agriculture Research, Dr. George Hochmuth and Dr. Terril Nell, the head of the UF Center for Landscape Conservation and Ecology made presentations to the Board after a brief public comment period. Others also presented briefly including Holly Greening, the moderator of the fertilizer ordinance meeting at the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. Bottom line here is the Board decided to pursue holding workshops to discuss adopting a potential ordinance for Hillsborough County, but no ominous decision was made.

What's the Difference? Why Another Round of Meetings?

The Estuary Program meetings last spring were requested by governments and agencies to consider if the watershed needs a fertilizer ordinance and, if so, to develop a potential ordinance which individual governments could then choose to adopt. The watershed here refers to Hillsborough, Manatee, Pinellas and parts of Polk Counties. Basically the meetings were designed to create discussion and an ordinance framework that could be used by the watershed governments if they want to use it. No legal teeth to this potential ordinance yet. Each government would still have to adopt it through their own processes. It does carry weight however, because it was developed through a respected process with public and stakeholder participation.

Take a look at the report from the Tampa Bay Estuary Program Meetings and links to other ordinances around the state on the Laws and Ordinance Page of www.prohort.net here http://prohort.ifas.ufl.edu/laws_ordinances/index.shtml

The Dreaded Blackout Period

A majority of the issues of "discussion" when it comes to adopting an ordinance here are related to including a "blackout" or restricted period. This refers to prohibiting nitrogen applications, including slow release nitrogen during the rainy season from June 1 through September 30. This policy went into effect last year as part of the fertilizer ordinance in Sarasota and is included in the ordinance proposed by the Estuary Program meetings.

Why not a "Blackout" Period?

UF does not recommend a blackout period for several reasons. The idea behind opposing them is that the summer months are the time of most active growth in which turf has the highest demand for essential nutrients such as nitrogen and no research is available as to what the effects of this might be over time.

A graphic depicting the depth of roots over the months of the year was presented by UF at the meeting. Based on the research presented, **roots appear to be most vigorous and actively able to take up nutrients during the summer months. During the spring and fall root depth and density decline, decreasing the ability of the plant to take up available nutrients.**

Loading Up to Compensate

A blackout period has the real potential to induce overfertilization before and after the restricted period to compensate for not being able to use it for four months. Homeowners and professionals alike will feel the burn, tempted to apply extra nitrogen just before and after this period to maintain their turf. In light of the fact that root density is lower in spring and fall than in the summer, the propensity for people to compensate for not being able to fertilize with nitrogen in the summer by **putting out more fertilizer** in the spring and fall could ultimately lead to more rather than less leaching and runoff because roots are not as vigorous during this time and may not absorb all of the available nitrogen applied. The challenge of landscape companies being able to reach all of their customers timed just before or after the restricted period for application has also been mentioned by industry.

Decreased Turf Quality Could Have Negative Effects on Water Quality

Turf not fertilized during the major growing season may lead to a nitrogen deficiency. An uncorrected **nitrogen deficiency could lead to decreased quality and density of turf** which could then lead to increased leaching and runoff. Turf is actually a really great filter and absorber of available nutrients. If a lack of available nitrogen leads to turf decline, the **resulting reduction in the benefits of turf (filtering and soil stabilization)** could **end up allowing more pollutants in stormwater** and groundwater, possibly leaving us in worse shape than we started in.

At this point no one quite knows what will happen because there is no solid research on it. The point is that it may make people feel they have done something to improve water quality, but there are a lot of variables and no conclusive way to know the a blackout period will improve water quality and may in effect end up making the problem worse.

Lack of Consensus

There was not a consensus on a blackout period through the Estuary Program process. In the end the bodies of government that asked the Estuary Program to hold the workshops voted to include them in the potential model ordinance. The blackout period was not included in the model fertilizer ordinance developed by

the Statewide Fertilizer Consumer Task Force- see that report in the resources sidebar here http://prohort.ifas.ufl.edu/laws_ordinances/fertilizer.shtml

O.K. So Blackouts are Questionable: What does UF Suggest?

UF has suggested that one application of 1 pound of slow release nitrogen be allowed during the blackout period if a nitrogen deficiency has been diagnosed by a tissue test, a BMP certified professional or Extension Agent.

What's Coming Next?

The board of the EPC appears to be willing to open up the ordinance discussion again in their coming workshops. They want to know how things have played out in Sarasota. There was no one at the meeting prepared with that information because at this point it's just not available. For one thing we would expect it may take more than one year for significant decline to be noticed. Then there is the part where scientific studies have to be repeated over multiple years to be reliable and accurate, in order to account for things like variation in temperature and rainfall i.e. really wet/ dry/ hot/ cold year or years.

What Resources are Available?

UF would like those developing ordinances to use the FAQs publications below for an overview on the latest research available. These will be added to http://prohort.ifas.ufl.edu/laws_ordinances/fertilizer.shtml shortly.

Frequently Asked Questions about Landscape
Fertilization for Florida-Friendly Landscaping Ordinances
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/WQ/WQ14300.pdf>

Frequently Asked Questions about Landscape Irrigation
for Florida-Friendly Landscaping Ordinances
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/WQ/WQ14200.pdf>

Frequently Asked Questions about Florida-Friendly Landscaping
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/WQ144>

Tracking the Meetings: Sorry to Say

I do not expect to be able to keep up with fertilizer meetings from Polk County, so you may want to track them, I expect through the Hillsborough County EPC site <http://www.epchc.org/>. I may be sending updates to people from Polk, but please do not take this as a promise. You would be surprised how decisions are made based on who shows up to meetings. The members of the Board are looking for input from the people this will affect, one mentioned wanting to hear from people from the fertilizer industry specifically.

Just the Facts Please!

Fertilizer Ordinances at Tree and Landscape Short Course February 20 at the Fairgrounds

UF Turfgrass Specialist, Dr. Laurie Trenholm will present the latest on fertilizer ordinances, comparing what's out there and looking ahead to what to expect in the future.

See the full agenda here <http://prohort.ifas.ufl.edu/events/tree-landscape-short-course.shtml>

Register here

<http://www.regonline.com/builder/site/Default.aspx?eventid=666291>

\$40

5 ISA CEUs, 4 FNGLA,

4 DACS CEUs in Private, L&O, Limited L&O, Limited Commercial Maintenance, O&T.

This means you can renew your Limited Commercial ("Roundup license") or Limited L&O license with this event.

Wow this is enough at once! Look for what is happening at the state level in a few days.

On a Related Note:

The (slightly) revised edition of the BMP manual is ready online

<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/water/nonpoint/pubs.htm> (1.1mb)

It will also be posted on ProHort and printed copies will be available in the Extension office lobby soon.

Here's hoping they are ready for the Short Course!

Mary Beth Henry

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