



THE TAMPA BAY SEAGRASS MIRACLE

Posted March 18, 2016; Mac Caraway, Executive Director

In three stories or editorials (May 19th 29th and 30th, 2015) the Bradenton Herald wrote about the tremendous recovery in seagrass beds in Tampa Bay – news all Floridians should be absolutely thrilled about. A reading of these pieces includes far more than a suggestion that there is a cause-and-effect connection between the seagrass bed recoveries and the fertilizer blackout component of the relevant fertilizer ordinances passed in the region (Pinellas-2010; City of Tampa-2011; Manatee-2011).

Confessing that this blog advocates for the Green Industries (turfgrass, landscape, golf, professional lawn care, etc.), and that I have strong feelings about personal property rights, I'll defer offering my own assessment of those editorial suggestions. Instead, let me use the information offered by the Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) itself.

The following comes from an article published on TBO.com on March 22, 2014. In that article, the TBEP was attributed as stating that 34,642 acres of seagrass beds had recovered through 2012, only 3,358 acres shy of the TBEP's total goal of 38,000 acres. The TBEP went on to say that 1,745 of those recovered acres happened from 2010 – 2012. That means that the balance of the recovery (32,897 acres) occurred in 2009 or before. For starters, that means that 87% of the TBEP goal is indisputably UN-attributable to the fertilizer blackout policies. Stated another way, that means that 95% of the 34,642 recovered acres happened before 2010 when the first blackout was passed. Finally, that means that looking at the implementation years (passage-year plus 1) of the blackouts (Pinellas-2011; City of Tampa-2012; Manatee-2012), it is clear to see that 0% of the recovered acres could be attributable to blackout policies.

Fast-forward to the TBEP's most recent inventory of 40,295 acres of recovered seagrass beds. That is an additional 5,653 acres from the 2012 count (i.e. in 2013 and 2014). Looking again at the implementation dates, at the acknowledged fact that the blackouts are largely unenforced, at the enormous scale of the endeavor, at the relatively slow seagrass growth rates (studies of compensatory seagrass replacement suggest average density recoveries ranging from 3 to 17 years), and given the beneficial impact of the significant “side populations” of already-recovered beds, no reasonable person could say that these recoveries

have any significant connection whatsoever to the blackout element of the fertilizer ordinances noted. In addition, you must logically say that the blackouts have not added anything material to the improvement of the bay – what was working before 2012 (pre-blackout) is simply still working.

OK, so what happened then? I feel like I can express an educated opinion on this, completely apart from my involvement with the Green Industries. Having spent two terms on the SWFWMD's Manasota Basin Board, and having been a consistent supporter in that role of the TBEP and its efforts connected with Tampa Bay, the answer is, in a way, easier than you might think. Further, the TBO.com article really makes my case. Namely that subsequent to the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, local governments and industry got seriously busy doing the right things. They quit dumping effluents in the bay, they adopted strict management techniques for stormwater and nutrient management, and they partnered with the FDEP, SWFWMD and TBEP on huge reclamation and treatment projects. And in the ensuing decades, like a battleship on a new bearing, those efforts continued, the bay started to respond, and it has picked up the glorious head of steam it now enjoys. Once again, the efforts and forces at work, worked! Kudos of the highest order to all involved.

Given this information, is it simply OK now to say of the blackouts "OK, no harm, no foul"? No, no, no. There is a flagrant foul in the form of the punitive impacts on an industry that was in fact a partner in the solution. Then there is a foul in the blackout legacy that is adversely impacting other communities (e.g. the Indian River Lagoon / IRL area). Having attended numerous public hearings in that region, I heard blackout enablers say over and over and over again "Look at Tampa Bay's recovery that happened because of their blackout ordinances – you need to do that here too". Sadly, in spite of the Green Industry's extensive efforts to provide the local media and local elected officials the crystal-clear facts above, some of those local governments opted to include the blackout element in their ordinances, and, in my opinion, their citizens were sold a bill of goods that the IRL was going to miraculously recover because of it. Spoiler alert – it hasn't. The reality is that until those local governments take the hard (and expensive) steps that were taken in southwest Florida to address the real root causes, including septic reform, reclaimed water redirection, and aggressive stormwater management and treatment, the IRL is going to remain impaired. Low-hanging fruit in this issue is a myth. I lay the legacy of false hope squarely at the feet of the leadership of the blackout enablers who perpetrated a real fiction on those east coast elected officials and residents looking for answers.

To those who say the blackouts are a means of educating the public on responsible fertilizer use, I would suggest that we try a radical approach that the

SWFWMD has used very successfully in natural resource protection matters (in lieu of a punitive regulatory-first mentality). Wait for it – it's called... education! I think people want to do the right things and should be given the benefit of the doubt – not a 2 x 4.

Based on the TBEP data then, the informed outcome would be to repeal the blackouts. Short of that, they should be revisited with meaningful stakeholder workshops to get a thorough and balanced look at the science and the facts. Then having done some actual due diligence, we can come up with something a little more sophisticated than the blackouts. Isn't that what good government is supposed to do?