

Response to The Charlotte Sun, “OUR VIEW Learn, follow local fertilizer use regulations”

The July 5, 2018 editorial on local fertilizer use regulations offers an opportunity for a very different point of view.

All Floridians should be rightly focused on protecting water quality. No argument there. Unfortunately, the editorial departs from the established science on several counts.

Most counties on Florida's SW coast have passed summertime fertilizer blackout ordinances. As stated, that means fertilizers MAY NOT be applied during the growing season for lawns and landscapes, and fertilizer MAY ONLY be applied during the dormant or near-dormant season. Hmm. Let's explore that for a minute.

The editorial states that fertilizer necessarily runs off if applied during the summer rainy season. That may seem to be true, just like it used to seem that a flat world might be true. Conventional wisdoms like this are easily shown to be fact-deficient. Our suggestion? Read what the FDEP has to say about urban fertilizer at <https://wfrec.ifas.ufl.edu/turfgrass-science/nutrient-management-research/fdep-funded-study/>.

Here's the short version: When properly applied, even in the rainy season, fertilizer goes nowhere – it is utilized efficiently by growing plants, which need it.

If applied IMPROPERLY, left on sidewalks and driveways, and if clippings are blown into storm sewers, yes, that's a problem. But the ordinances noted don't make any distinction in who they target. Accordingly, the experts – licensed lawn-care professionals – are lumped in with the careless and ignorant and are forbidden from doing things the right way as well. That's flawed policy making to be sure.

The solution? Amend these well-meaning but flawed ordinances to exempt licensed pros, just like they exempt the local governments themselves. That's fair, easy and entirely consistent with the water-protection objectives of EVERYONE.

You don't even have to take our word for it. Recently, local governments like Citrus and Hernando Counties have adopted winter blackouts, which include this professional exemption. This cures the truly bizarre command to starve plants when they are growing and to feed them when they are in or near dormancy. Try that with a bear! Also, Orange County and its Environmental Protection Commission both recently voted unanimously to MAINTAIN their exemption for licensed lawn care professionals, originally passed in 2009. Impaired water bodies in Orange County are coming OFF their lists because they rightly focus on education. Now that's effective policy making.

To another point in the editorial, the often-repeated notion that “summer blends” (e.g. iron) are enough for plants is TOTAL NONSENSE. While useful for very temporary aesthetic purposes, it does not support a plant's need to produce food for itself – period.

As to red tide, we wholly concur with Mote's findings as stated by Mote, which have been around for a long time. You'd never know that by the fertilizer fear mongering on red tide by some activist groups, but we digress. Mote's observation that local nutrient loading may contribute to an existing red tide outbreak simply points to the need for educating the bad actors – BUT IT IS NOT JUSTIFICATION FOR PUNISHING THE INNOCENT. We don't punish good drivers for the actions of drunk drivers, do we? Of course not!

Our industry fully supports the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (FDEP) model fertilizer ordinance as created and updated. It was promulgated after considerable time and effort by a broad inclusive stakeholder group. Some local governments have chosen to be more restrictive than the model. That's fine, as long as that action is based on the facts and on fundamental fairness.

Obviously then, the ordinances written to punish the pros are activist policy, not evidence-based policy. Let us be crystal clear – there is ZERO peer-reviewed science to support such an approach, or that such ordinances have accomplished anything. Are they supported by FDEP? No. By the Florida Department of Agriculture? No. By any of the state's water management districts? No. By any relevant academic institutions? No.

Guided by peer-reviewed research and decades-long cultures of using minimum inputs, Florida's licensed lawn-care professionals are the first line of defense in responsible nutrient management and should be enthusiastically engaged as partners, not regulated like adversaries.

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EREF is a non-profit industry association located in Lakeland, Florida. Its mission is to protect Florida's environment and natural resources through the funding of environmental research and the sharing of sound scientific findings on the environmental and human-health benefits of properly maintained greenspaces and urban landscapes.