

The Ledger
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I wrote recently about some of the natural signs of the start of summer.

Let me talk about one sign that humans cause.

That is the increase in algae blooms on some water bodies because of a combination of nutrient pollution from human activities and warmer weather, which combine to create optimum conditions for algae growth.

Polk usually doesn't experience anything as dramatic as the algae blooms recorded in the St. Lucie Inlet as a result of discharges from Lake Okeechobee, but the simple biological fact is that better-fed organisms will thrive.

For plants, nitrogen and phosphorous serve that purpose.

This is the time of the year when ordinances in many Florida counties go into force that ban the summertime use of fertilizers containing phosphorous and nitrogen on lawns. Polk is not among them.

The idea began in 2007 when St. Petersburg officials passed the first Florida ordinance restricting summertime lawn fertilizer applications in an attempt to deal with widespread pollution at a community level.

The idea behind it is simple. Commercial fertilizers contain phosphorous and nitrogen. Summer is the rainy season. Rains increase fertilizer runoff from yards into storm drains. Water in storm drains ends up in water bodies.

Florida water bodies have been declining because they are already overpolluted with phosphorous and nitrogen. Adding more phosphorous and nitrogen will cause further damage.

Most of the cities and counties that have enacted seasonal fertilizer bans lie in coastal areas where the cumulative impact of upstream fertilizer runoff is the greatest.

Polk enacted a weak fertilizer ordinance in 2013. It contains no seasonal restrictions, relying instead only on the existence of weather alerts for thunderstorms, floods or tropical storms.

The variance in the strength of fertilizer ordinances is related to the politics of this issue.

It affects entrenched economic interests. I'm talking about the people who sell turf — Florida's largest agricultural crop — and fertilizer and the chemical-intensive maintenance of unnatural landscapes that result.

The fertilizer and lawn-maintenance lobbies persuaded the Florida Legislature in 2012 to halt further local ordinances beyond an industry-drafted so-called "model ordinance" unless local officials can come up with scientific studies that prove dumping more nutrients into the environment is really harmful.

That explains Polk's milquetoast ordinance.

For the record, I do not fertilize what little lawn I have. Most of the undeveloped sections of my property are devoted to landscaped areas filled with native or Florida-friendly plants to attract wildlife.

Lawns not only generate pollution because of the fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides that are applied to make them look attractive, and the grass clippings that end up in drainage systems, but they require irrigation.

Modern irrigation systems are technically supposed to include rain sensors to prevent excessive irrigation. But surveys have found sensors in many yards are either uninstalled or improperly installed.

Polk officials are struggling with meeting future water demands, and it seems abandoning the idea that lush lawns are a good idea may reduce the projected water demand.

There are some parts of Polk County, such as along some of the high ridges that lie within the county, where lawns are an even worse idea because these ridges are nothing more than ancient desert islands.

They were never meant to be lush in the first place.

If we're looking for ways to reduce water consumption and water pollution, many people need to look no farther than out their front door.