

## **Be Wise If You Fertilize**

By Mick Denham

Member, Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council

Imagine a Florida where swimming and fishing are banned every day due to water pollution. Imagine our economy, ecology and very way of life destroyed. The villain in this all too real scenario is **POOR WATER QUALITY**, which can be directly and scientifically linked to excessive levels of nutrients, **fertilizer** being a principle culprit.

When nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizers wind up in a neighborhood pond, canal, river or even a drainage ditch, these nutrients pollute the water, eventually finding their way into our bays and estuaries and feeding the algae that clog our beaches.

Many people fertilize without knowing the consequences. Fertilizer sales in the region increased 62% between 2003 and 2006. Taking action is vital.

We on the Lower West Coast Watersheds Subcommittee of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SFRPC) are providing every community with tools to fight urban water pollution.

Last year, the SFWRPC unanimously adopted a Fertilizer Resolution. This Resolution, carefully reviewed by scientific peers, recommends the use of low phosphorus and nitrogen fertilizers where nitrogen is in slow release form. It also calls for no fertilizing at all during July, August and September. During our rainy season, fertilizer does nothing to enhance plants, washing directly into our waters.

Every community in Southwest Florida should adopt a Fertilizer Control Ordinance using our Resolution as a guide.

Opponents tell us that fertilizers can do no wrong!

These opponents fail to recognize the science that clearly proves high nitrogen and phosphorus levels damage our environment. Our opponents say that “Best Management Practices” (BMPs) are good enough.

BMPs are a good reference and guide, but absolutely **not enforceable**. To be successful, we need for every County and every City in Southwest Florida to pass a Fertilizer Control Ordinance that can be enforced.

Opponents say that buffer zones are not important. A buffer zone establishes setbacks that tell property owners where they can fertilize within a certain distance of water. This makes practical environmental sense.

**If you truly want to improve our water quality, you need to take action.** Please contact your local City Council and County Commissioners. Urge them to pass a Fertilizer Ordinance. On your own lawn, use only low phosphorus and nitrogen fertilizers **if** you choose to fertilize. Look for slow release or slowly available nitrogen.

This effort to “clean up our own backyard” will reduce pollution. It will also better position us to work effectively in Washington and Tallahassee. We need their support as we seek long-term solutions to protect water quality. Our local way of life depends on our ability to act as a region to rescue our water quality.

Think again about that fishing trip where no fish were caught. That day at the beach where our children were not able to swim because the water was declared unhealthy.

Each of us can be advocates to control water pollution by reducing our use of fertilizer. Massive amounts of algae still linger just off shore—a symptom that we cannot afford to ignore. Help us to improve our water quality. Contact your City Council and County Commission and become part of the solution today.