

From July 15 Sarasota Herald Tribune:

A Divide Over Stricter Fertilizer Laws

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SARASOTA COUNTY -- Ed Rosenthal, president of fertilizer manufacturer Florikan, believes Sarasota County's proposed fertilizer restrictions could be the most significant environmental regulations passed by the county in years.

But George Pickhardt, president of Sarasota landscaping firm Arrow Environmental Services, fears the ordinance could run lawn maintenance and pest control firms into the ground with overregulation.

"We are regulated, regulated, regulated," Pickhardt said. "Give us a break. Let us do our job."

The two views represent the deep divide over Sarasota's proposed fertilizer ordinances, which would be among the toughest in the state for people who sell and use the chemicals for a living.

The ordinances, which would put restrictions on the kinds of fertilizer residents could use and when they could use it, are up for approval next month and seem likely to pass. The Sarasota County commissioners took up the issue this week, but postponed a decision, saying they needed more information.

Opponents of the rules are lobbying the county to scale back or kill the regulations. Proponents, which include environmentalist groups such as the Sierra Club as well as dealers such as Florikan, are upset that the county balked at a chance to approve the rules.

The strong reaction to the proposal reflects a budding conflict in other parts of the state, such as the Lee County city of Sanibel, which approved tough restrictions this year. Charlotte and Manatee counties, where officials are considering whether Sarasota's proposal could work for them, might be the next to enter the fray.

Sarasota County leaders have touted the rules as a victory for water quality and a blow against harmful algal blooms in the Gulf of Mexico.

Russ Hoffman, owner of Beautiful Ponds Inc., helps property owners learn how to better maintain their ponds. He believes the ordinance would legislate common sense by preventing the spread of fertilizer runoff into waterways.

"I really believe it will make the lake prettier and create a more viable ecosystem," he said.

The restrictions would prevent the use of fertilizers that contain nitrogen and phosphorus in the rainy summer season. They would also require fertilizers to contain low levels of phosphorus, establish a fertilizer-free zone near bodies of water and force residents to apply no more than a few pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year.

Mike Scheyhing, golf course superintendent at Venice Golf and Country Club, does not have to worry too much, because golf courses and farms are exempt in the proposal. But Scheyhing still believes the county would be better off if it let professionals set the rules about fertilizer application.

"I want to see decisions made on research and science, and not on personal agendas and hearsay," Scheyhing said.

If the county approves the ordinance, officials and residents can expect an adjustment period, said Rob Loflin, Sanibel natural resource manager.

Sanibel approved its rules earlier this year and is in the middle of a six-month waiting period before it

begins to enforce them. Officials are using the time to educate residents and businesses, Loflin said.

It has been a tall order to educate Sanibel, a city of 6,000, Loflin said. Sarasota County has more than 366,000 residents.

"It is definitely going to be a retraining of residents and contractors and landscapers of how they apply fertilizer," Loflin said. "We're still in the middle of that."

Other communities, including the cities of Sarasota and Crystal River, the town of Longboat Key and Martin and Citrus counties, have made strides toward enacting their own rules.

Sarasota's proposed restrictions garnered five hours of testimony in a Wednesday public hearing. Many of the speakers were representatives from local lawn care and pest control companies.

Joe Welch, service director of Middleton Lawn and Pest Control, a statewide firm based in Orlando, told the commissioners that they might encourage over-fertilization in the dry season if they ban fertilizer in the rainy season.

"When you have a restricted season, you change the way you act in the rest of the season," Welch said.

The commissioners considered approving the ordinance on Wednesday but decided they needed more information to set fair standards for the chemical composition of fertilizer. The proposal is expected to come back for a vote Aug. 27.

The rules would take effect six months after approval. That will give the county time to provide training courses in the use of fertilizer.

Rosenthal, of Florikan, said he hopes the ordinance passes.

"Anything that can change behavior, that can make consumers more aware that nutrients need to be used judiciously, is very, very positive," he said.

Staff writer Kate Spinner contributed to this report.

THE FACTS:

Sarasota County's proposed fertilizer rules could:

Prevent the use of fertilizers that contain nitrogen and phosphorus in the rainy summer season.

Require companies that apply fertilizer to complete a training course.

Require residents to apply no more than a few pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year.

Establish a fertilizer-free zone near all bodies of water.

Set limits for levels of phosphorus in fertilizers.

Make the use of "slow-release" fertilizer mandatory.