

Bylaw banning phosphates in fertilizer can only help - Point of View

Updated 3 hours ago

The politics of enacting a bylaw banning the use of phosphates in lawn fertilizer in Greater Sudbury is becoming confrontational. It's important that all sides --municipal officials and lake stewardship organizations -- work together to tackle what is becoming a serious threat to our lakes.

Sometimes, a bylaw's message is not so much the threat of punishment, but a signal of how seriously the city approaches a problem. There isn't a compelling reason why Greater Sudbury should not take this route.

Phosphates exist naturally in the environment, and indeed are required for plant growth. But runoff of lawn pesticides -- which end up in rivers and lakes --creates an oversupply, which can result in plumes of blue-green algae in lakes.

These algae plumes --pond scum, to the casual observer --are ugly business. Once they form in a lake, it's almost impossible to get rid of them. The Sudbury and District Health Unit issues a warning that is never rescinded.

You can't drink or swim in the water near a blue-green algae plume. You can't cook in water that contains blue-green algae. You can't boil the water because that could make it more toxic. You shouldn't eat fish that swim in it. You can't treat the water with disinfectant because that may make it more toxic, as well.

The appearance of blue-green algae in a lake will change the lifestyle of people who live nearby, and of those who use it for recreation.

And that is what we do in the North, we live by, and play in, our lakes.

The Greater Sudbury Watershed Alliance, noting that blue-green algae has appeared in 12 area lakes -- including in Ramsey Lake, a source of drinking water --wants such a ban, which would be the first in Ontario.

ut city staff prefer an education campaign and an initiative to work with retailers to stop selling

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products that contain phosphates. There isn't much enthusiasm for compromise on either side.

A report by city staff says 95% of the volume of products sold as lawn fertilizer in Greater Sudbury no longer contain phosphates, so a ban is not needed. Retailers are open to the idea of getting rid of phosphate products, and public education campaigns have shown to be effective, the report says. A ban would increase the workload on an already taxed staff, and it would be almost impossible to enforce, the report says. As well, staff say it's not clear that municipalities in Ontario even have the power to enact such a bylaw, given provincial and federal oversight.

Besides, the report says, municipalities that do have bylaws in place -- mostly in the U.S. -- enacted them in the early 2000s. Since then, the industry has had a "profound market shift" and is now working to reduce the use of phosphates. But Stephen Butcher, chair of the Long Lake Stewardship committee and co-chair of the Greater Sudbury Watershed Alliance, says companies only cut phosphates because laws made them do so, and that municipalities have the right to ban phosphates.

City council is expected to consider a proposal for a bylaw today that would ban the use of fertilizers that contain phosphates, although another option presented by staff is to avoid the bylaw and press ahead with a public education campaign.

No one disputes the presence of excessive phosphates due to runoff is bad, so let's get the politics out of the way. There's nothing to say a public education campaign can't work hand-in-hand with a bylaw.

Together, the message given by the municipality known as the City of Lakes would be unequivocal.

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