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Sierra Club pushes to restrict lawn fertilizer use and reduce tainted runoff

By **CHRISTINE STAPLETON**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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The battle to clean Florida's waterways is moving to your yard.

The Sierra Club is mounting a pre-emptive strike against efforts to water down "local urban fertilizer management" ordinances that restrict when and how fertilizers with nitrogen and phosphorus can be applied to lawns and landscaping.

"I want to put this in front of every editorial board before the legislative session," said Cris Costello, the regional representative of the Sierra Club in Sarasota, after meeting on Tuesday with the editorial board of The Palm Beach Post. "You have to start somewhere."

Costello has been battling government agencies and "Big Fertilizer" for over two years in a effort to spread the word -- and hopefully restrictions -- other counties have enacted regarding fertilizer application in urban areas, especially those near lakes, streams, rivers and the ocean.

Both Sarasota and Lee counties have imposed ordinances that ban the application of fertilizer during summer months -- from June 1 to September 30. Sarasota county goes farther, barring the sale of fertilizer during the rainy season. The ban does not apply to golf courses and athletic fields.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida has published recommendations for fertilizing yards. Among them: Do not fertilize before a heavy rain or within 10 feet of a water source; use recommended amounts and slow-release fertilizers and sweep up spilled fertilizer instead of washing or blowing it into the street. However, the institute does not recommend a summer black-out period for applying fertilizers.

Neither does the model ordinance the Florida Department of Environmental Protection issued last year for counties and cities to use in drafting their own laws. According to the model ordinance, fertilizing turf may actually reduce the amount of nutrients in stormwater runoff, because healthier root systems can better trap and absorb nutrients, said Jerry Brooks, the director of the division of environmental assessment and restoration at the DEP.

"Right now I do not know the answer to that," said Brooks, adding that the department is currently reviewing the science and its model ordinance.

Meanwhile, the Sierra Club hopes to publicize the debate before the next legislative session, in which Florida lawmakers will likely consider setting standards.

Christine_Stapleton@pbpost.com

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