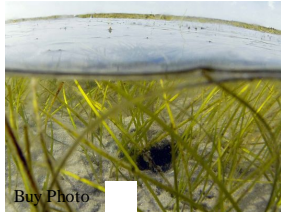


# Did the summer fertilizer ban work?

Jim Waymer, FLORIDA TODAY 1:04 p.m. EDT October 4, 2014

*Experts say it's too soon to tell if lawn restrictions helped reduce Indian River Lagoon algae blooms and save seagrass*



(Photo: CRAIG RUBADOUX/FLORIDA TODAY)

The jury is still out on how much rainy-season fertilizer bans can help heal the Indian River Lagoon.

But in the first summer of widespread bans in Brevard County, manufacturers distributed almost two-thirds less fertilizer here during peak summer months than last summer.

At first, as local governments debated the bans, locals stocked up on lawn fertilizer and the tonnage distributed in Brevard initially grew, state agriculture data shows. But as the bans set in, lawn fertilizer distribution plummeted. Industry officials say it's too soon to read a trend, but some businesses aren't waiting. They're already selling new, more lagoon-friendly fertilizer.

Officials hope less fertilizer on grass will grow back more seagrass in the lagoon, by reducing the frequency and intensity of algae blooms.

"It's been a godsend," said Dave Grover, owner of Sun Harbor Nursery in Indian Harbour Beach, of a new slow-release nitrogen fertilizer blend he started selling before the bans kicked in. "They haven't had to fertilize all summer."

**RELATED:** [Tons of turf fertilizer distributed to Brevard County since 2012 \(https://public.tableausoftware.com/profile/jim3672#!/vizhome/Fertilizer\\_0/Dashboard1\)](https://public.tableausoftware.com/profile/jim3672#!/vizhome/Fertilizer_0/Dashboard1)

His overall fertilizer sales took a hit this summer, but in the long run he foresees a healthier business and lagoon as a result of the bans, which run June to Sept. 30.

"It's going to help business, because I sold a lot before the ban went into effect," said Grover, "When Oct. 1 rolls around, it will be like a floodgate."

Brevard County and almost every local city had rainy season fertilizer bans in effect this summer. Melbourne's was approved in September and Rockledge's ban took effect last year. The local ordinances also require slow-release nitrogen and share other similar provisions but differ in the buffers required when fertilizing near waters.

Wednesday marked the first day people can resume fertilizing. But ordinances still prohibit fertilizing during or just before or after heavy rains.

According to state department of agriculture data obtained by [FLORIDA TODAY \(http://www.floridatoday.com\)](http://www.floridatoday.com):



Lisa Prather, an environmental manager from Orlando, and Thomas Reed, an environmental specialist, check seagrass growth in the Indian River Lagoon near Sebastian Inlet. (Photo: 2010 CRAIG RUBADOUX/FLORIDA TODAY FILE)

- Before the bans, amid extensive public debate about the impacts to the lagoon, turf fertilizer distributed in Brevard increased by 22 percent over the previous fiscal year, to 4,179 tons.
- But as the summer bans set in and word spread, lawn fertilizer distribution in June, July and August dipped sharply in Brevard, to 488 tons, compared with 1,385 tons during the same three-month period last year, a 65 percent drop.
- Since July 2012, when manatees began dying of an unexplained malady and local fertilizer debates ramped up, some 7,818 tons of lawn fertilizer has been distributed to Brevard, almost 30 pounds per every person in the county.

Fertilizer ordinances haven't been in effect long enough to read a trend, officials from The Scotts Miracle-Gro Company said. Many variables affect fertilizer sales, making it hard to attribute short or long-term changes to any one single factor, including new restrictions, Scotts spokeswoman Molly Jennings said.

She noted that Scott no longer sells fertilizer that contains phosphorous in Brevard and that its top-selling brands include 50 percent slow-release nitrogen.

Scotts also launched a new mineralizer treatment and has increased the use of other nutrients during the rainy-season blackout, she said, including magnesium and potassium.



Melbourne Mayor Kathy Meehan sits down with FLORIDA TODAY's Matt Reed to discuss issues affecting downtown Melbourne including efforts to clean the Indian River Lagoon. Posted 8/27/14

The state's lawn fertilizer data comes with caveats. A fertilizer company could have a distribution center in a county and then distribute it to stores in other counties, explained Weldon Collier, a program planning coordinator with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. "I would suspect most of it is probably applied in the county of destination, but not with a 100 percent certainty," Collier said.

Advocates for stricter fertilizer rules pointed to research that shows lawns can still thrive without fertilizing during rainy months.

Opponents — most associated with fertilizer, turf grass or lawn-care interests — said depriving grass of nutrients when it's most able to absorb them, during peak growing season, would result in more nitrogen and phosphorus running off the weaker grass when applied at other times of the year.

In recent years, unprecedented algae blooms have choked off tens of thousands of acres of seagrass in the lagoon. Seagrass is important source of food and shelter for marine life in the lagoon.

The seagrass die-off was followed by the mysterious deaths of large numbers of manatees, dolphins and pelicans.

Excessive nitrogen and phosphorous — the active ingredients in most fertilizer — is widely suspected of feeding the lagoon's algae blooms.

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Leaking septic tanks, pet waste, power plants, tailpipes and groundwater also contribute nitrogen and phosphorus to the lagoon, with each pound capable of growing more than 500 pounds of algae.

But stricter fertilizer rules have been the recent focus as an inexpensive way for the county to reduce nutrients flowing into the lagoon.

So far, residents seem to be complying.

"We got questions. I can not think of a single complaint," said Virginia Barker, who manages Brevard's watershed program.

County officials had vowed initially not to seek out offenders, but to respond to complaints that the fertilizer rules were being broken. Code-enforcement officers who witness people violating the rules can issue fines up to \$500.

The ordinance also bans use of phosphorus-containing fertilizer without a soil test to prove the chemical is needed. Much of Florida's soils are considered already rich in phosphorus. The previous ordinance had allowed low-phosphorus fertilizers without the soil test.

The ordinance also requires at least 50 percent slow-release nitrogen fertilizer.

Lawn-care interests said to trust the licensed professionals, that the rules threatened lawns, livelihoods and property rights and were unenforceable.



Since biologists have provided few answers to what's wrong with the ailing Indian River Lagoon, arm-chair ecologists have filled the void by cooking up their own theories. By Jim Waymer and Tim Walters Posted May 2, 2014

The state is requiring Brevard within 15 years to sharply reduce the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus flowing into its share of the lagoon, by more than half in some areas, according to state environmental officials.

Many lagoon advocates point to the Tampa Bay Estuary Program as proof strong fertilizer rules work. The bay's seagrass recovered after major stormwater and sewer upgrades, as well as strong local fertilizer ordinances.

But there wasn't much change in nitrogen fertilizer sales after rainy season bans took effect in that region, said Nanette O'Hara, a spokeswoman for the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. The exception was Pinellas County, which in 2011 banned retail sales of nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers.

In the first year of retail ban, nitrogen fertilizer sales in Pinellas dropped almost 20 percent, from 816 to 654 tons.

"We're not seeing a correlation here with sales dropping where there are not sales bans," O'Hara said.

The Tampa program is studying fertilizer use and sampling stormwater in Pinellas, Hillsborough and Manatee counties to see if water quality improved after the bans took effect.

While algae blooms continued to plague the Indian River Lagoon this summer, dire predictions of dead lawns fell flat.

"It's been fine," Grover, of Sun Harbor Nursery, said of his customers' lawns. "It's really worked well, and everybody's excited about being able to clean

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the river."

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Deadly flesh-eating bacteria found in Indian River lagoon. Posted October 2013.

Sources: Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; Tampa Bay Estuary Program; FLORIDA TODAY research

### My Brevard Yard program

- To learn about and sign up for the My Brevard Yard program, visit:

<http://mybrevardyard.eventbrite.com> (<http://mybrevardyard.eventbrite.com>)

- Or call the Brevard County Extension Office: 321-633-1702.

- Brevard County Extension:

<http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu> (<http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu>)

- Brevard County Extension horticulture information: <http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu/Horticulture/> (<http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu/Horticulture/index.shtml>)

[index.shtml](http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu/Horticulture/index.shtml) (<http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu/Horticulture/index.shtml>)

- Check out your city's fertilizer ordinance here: <http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu/ordinances.shtml> (<http://brevard.ifas.ufl.edu/ordinances.shtml>)

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