

Put stronger teeth into law to keep lagoon free of nutrients

Is the Indian River Lagoon worthy of the protection given to Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay and Charlotte Harbor?

The Indian River County Commission has finally supported a fertilizer ordinance. Scientists and concerned citizens provided the data and evidence that fertilizers pollute and thus harm our fish, plants and wildlife and consequently harm our businesses that depend upon a thriving lagoon.

Commissioners did vote 5-0 for three additional provisions, including the required use of at least 50 percent slow release nitrogen, zero phosphorus application without a soil test proving deficiency, and a 10-foot fertilizer-free zone around water bodies, but then they voted for an amendment to exempt those that get the Best Management Practice certification from following those stronger provisions! Only Commissioner Peter O'Bryan voted against this amendment.

However, I am puzzled that those who get Best Management Practice certification do not need to follow the proposed ordinance. Marine Resources Council's Executive Director Leesa Souto presented evidence that



professional applicators apply even more fertilizer than homeowners.

Thus, to be a certified "professional" fertilizer applicator all one needs is a six-hour course and evidently only 70 minutes is devoted to fertilizer education. Anyone can even take it online with savvy help. Actually one could fail the fertilizer part, still pass, and then have the right to pollute the lagoon.

Of course, these certified folks will still charge homeowners to pollute the lagoon. Thus it appears to me if you are wealthy, you can pollute; if you are poor and pollute you will be in jeopardy of violating the ordinance. Is this fair or logical? It's like if you take driver's education training, you do not have to obey the speed limits!

What else is missing? Having a rainy season ban is the backbone of strong fertilizer management in Florida. If we really want to help our lagoon, this is the most important one as

rain washes all the fertilizer into the ponds, rivers, canals and then the lagoon.

There is NO evidence that any lawns in the 50 strong-ordinance counties or municipalities have problems with these conditions even including the four-month summer ban, but there IS evidence that the strongest ordinances improved the health of their water bodies. The result would be that by passing a stronger ordinance, our green lawns won't be affected, and fertilizer companies and their chemical applicators won't suffer economic loss, and they will comply.

Since 2002, the county has spent more than \$32 million on storm-water improvements, algal turf scrubbers, mechanical cleaning screens, etc., to remove 16,685 pounds of nitrogen and 5,386 pounds of phosphorus from the lagoon. Since the lagoon is now officially called IMPAIRED, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the federal Environmental Protection Agency will require our county and cities to spend even more millions to remove nitrogen and phosphorus from the lagoon.

Thus with a weak ordinance, we miss an

opportunity to remove nitrogen and phosphorus for no money instead of spending more than \$1,000 to \$2,000 per pound to remove this new nitrogen and phosphorus.

If we keep polluting with our unnecessary intensive lawn fertilizing and failed septic tanks, we will continue with the same result, providing the final death cry of our lagoon.

It's laudable to have education and certification for everyone. Indian River County commissioners must pass an effective, strong fertilizer ordinance by amending it to hold everyone to the same strong conditions, so we can have both healthy turf grass and sea grass.

Our life on the Indian River Lagoon and St. Sebastian River as we knew it, as fishermen, tourists, and boaters, is gone. There are other measures that can be taken to reduce pollution in the lagoon, such as Commissioner Bob Solari's effort to get homeowners to reduce turf grass on their lawns. Commissioners, please protect us with a strong fertilizer ordinance for everyone.

Richard Baker is president of the Pelican Island Audubon Society, Vero Beach.