

## Lee County fertilizer use regulation takes effect May 13

Contributed by Lee County Division of Natural Resources

Originally published 3:27 p.m., Friday, April 24, 2009

Updated 3:27 p.m., Friday, April 24, 2009



LEE COUNTY — Lee County's new regulation on fertilizer use in the county takes effect May 13. The regulation applies to anyone who uses fertilizer and governs the content, amount and methods that can be used.

In 2008, Lee County Commissioners approved the fertilizer regulation as a way to protect water quality. Runoff of nutrients into rivers, bays and estuaries contributes to the formation of algae in area waters. and nutrients in fertilizer -- especially nitrogen and phosphorus -- contribute to algae blooms.

To help make residents aware of the new regulation, Lee County is spreading the message to "Fertilize Smart, Do Your Part."

"It's well understood that fertilizers -- in this case in the form of phosphorus and nitrogen -- are the catalyst for the devastating impacts we've been experiencing in Lee County back bays, estuaries and the Caloosahatchee," said Lee County Commission Chairman Ray Judah. "They're part of the nutrient soup that leads to algae blooms, red tides, fish kills and the destruction of our marine ecosystem."

"Our quality of life is dependent on these water bodies," said Lee County Commissioner Tammy Hall. "Lee County is 1,200 square miles, with 400 of that made up of creeks, rivers and waterways. We need to take responsibility for our part in making sure these water bodies are clean. And that includes being responsible homeowners and business owners when we fertilize."

Under the new rule, fertilizers containing nitrogen or phosphorus cannot be used during the four-month rainy season, June through September. During the rest of the year, use of fertilizer with those nutrients is limited, with any nitrogen required to be partially in a slow release form. Fertilizer application is prohibited within 10 feet of a water body. And spreaders must have a deflector shield to better target applications. In addition, clippings and trimmings must not be swept or blown into ditches, drains and water bodies, or onto roads and sidewalks.

"If you apply fertilizer and you have what my husband calls a frog strangler -- a heavy, heavy rain -- it's going to wash the excess fertilizer into our waterways," said Marti Daltry, regional conservation organizer for the Sierra Club's Fort Myers office. "And that's going to contribute to red tide or algae blooms."

"By having this ban on nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizer during the rainy season," Daltry added, "It will reduce those nutrients so we don't have as many algae blooms."

To help publicize the new fertilizer regulation and the message to "Fertilize Smart, Do Your Part," Lee County is using television, Internet and print materials to introduce two characters: Gen and Russ, nicknames for nitroGen and phosphoRuss. As the regulation bans use of fertilizers containing nitrogen and phosphorus during the summer rainy season, June through September, the Gen and Russ characters will be sent on a vacation.

"A lawn not receiving fertilizer for four months does seem like an awfully long time," said Tom Becker, Lee County's extension agent for Florida Yards and Neighborhoods. "But if you have a soil that has built up enough organic matter and nutrient-holding abilities, then there's no problem. If you have enough compost built into the soil or if you've used organic mulch, you've built up a reserve that holds the fertilizer you apply before the rainy season."

"There's no reason a lawn can't get through a very wet period and still receive nutrients if it has established a deep enough root system," Becker said.

The "Fertilize Smart, Do Your Part" characters, nitroGen and phosphoRuss, will also be featured as signage on a LeeTran bus, which will be on display at the Sierra Club Calusa Chapter's Earth Day festivities, Saturday, April 25 at Koreshan State Historic Site in Estero from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. The event features kayaking, art, food, music and environmental presentations. Admission to the festival is free, but there's a \$5 park charge for a carload of people.

"The fertilizer ordinance is really about taking personal responsibility in managing our ability to have clean water and avoid very expensive methods of cleaning up area waterways," said Hall. "It will save a lot of money in the long run as we try to assure water bodies stay healthy."

"I hope there is a heightened awareness by property owners of the direct correlation between the application of fertilizers and the degradation of our back bays and estuaries," said Judah. "We must be wiser in terms of the use of fertilizers in gardens and landscapes."

For more information on the Lee County Fertilizer ordinance, contact the Lee County Division of Natural Resources at 239-533-8706.