

CAPE CORAL DAILY BREEZE

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Fertilizer regulations designed to protect waters, curb red tide

No official rules for Cape

By CLINTON BURTON

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A ordinance aimed at reducing summer outbreaks of red tide and algae blooms is set to take effect May 13 throughout unincorporated Lee County.

Most cities throughout the county, including Fort Myers, Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel, have already adopted regulations as stringent, if not more so, however Cape Coral has yet to pass legislation to protect the city's vast expanse of canals.

"We have been battling impaired water here in Lee County for some time," Marti Daltry, regional conservation organizer for the Sierra Club's Fort Myers office, said. "We have to protect our waterways, and the best way is to prevent stormwater from carrying excessive fertiliz-

ers into our rivers and canals.

"We'd really like to get the Cape on board," she said.

Daltry said the Cape has guidelines in place for use of lawn fertilizers and other lawn and garden chemicals, but nothing is official and there is no ongoing education program.

"The Sierra Club has been instrumental here, and in other Florida counties, in helping get laws passed

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Fertilizer: Certain types cannot be used during rainy season

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and in getting the word out about protecting our natural resources," she said. "That's what this ordinance is trying to do, educate commercial landscapers and homeowners.

"Homeowners, more so than professionals, have a tendency to over-fertilize. There's the mentality that, 'If a little is good, than more is better,' and end up applying more," Daltry said.

Excessive fertilization is not the only issue. The type of fertilizer used, those with nitrogen and phosphorus, is what leads to algae blooms, red tide, fish kills and the destruction of the marine ecosystem.

"After an excess application, the extra nutrients wash into the water

and end up feeding the algae and causing red tide blooms, and generally polluting the water," she said.

The goal of the regulation is to prevent the runoff from heavy summertime rains from carrying the nitrogen and phosphorus into the waterways.

The new ordinance stipulates that fertilizers containing nitrogen or phosphorus cannot be used during the four-month rainy season of June through September.

"You can still use a summer blend to keep your lawn green, just nothing with nitrogen or phosphorus during the restricted period," Daltry said.

According to Tom Becker, Lee County's extension agent for Florida

Yards and Neighborhoods, a typical lawn should not suffer from the summer fertilizer prohibition.

"A lawn not receiving fertilizer for four months does seem like an awfully long time," he said. "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," Becker said. "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."

Fertilizer application is also prohibited within 10 feet of any body of water, seawall or wetland. All spreaders must be equipped with a deflector shield to better target application and to prevent errant fertilizer from being spread into water buffer areas and hard impervious surfaces like roads, driveways and sidewalks.

Clippings and trimmings cannot be swept or blown into ditches, drains or any body of water, or onto any road or sidewalk.

Professional landscapers are required to register with the county and have at least one employee certified through a training program offered by the University of Florida Lee County Extension Service.

"There are penalties and fines associated with violating the ordinance, but we're not going to see the fertilizer police running around," Daltry said. "We expect it to be treated like littering. People will see the sign, and it will serve as a reminder.

"What we are really looking for, what the real key is, is education," she said. "If someone is caught at the wrong time violating the ordinance, they could be fined, but education is the most important thing."

Daltry added that officials launched a public relations campaign on Earth Day to get the message out. To help publicize the new regulation and the message of "Fertilize Smart, Do Your Part," Lee County is using television, Internet, print materials and a LeeTran bus.

Hopefully, she said, the campaign will be enough in the Cape until an ordinance can be passed to supplant the unofficial guidelines currently in place.

City spokesperson Connie Barron said Thursday that a group spoke before the Cape Coral City Council on the issue Feb. 23, but it has yet to be addressed.

"We can't do anything until we are directed by city council to do so," she said.

When that will happen remains to be seen, but Councilmember Dolores Bertolini said the Cape needs to take action to keep the city's waterways healthy, despite a plethora of recent distractions.

"Since it's taken us so long to do some of the other things that we've gotten done, I had hoped that one of the other council members would take it up, but that hasn't happened," she said. "It's very important, and I think it is going to be a growing issue, but right now our plate is just overflowing and the fertilizer issue had gotten pushed into the background."

Bertolini said she will start looking into the issue again.