

A scenic view of a golf course at sunrise or sunset. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and scattered clouds. In the foreground, a body of water reflects the sky and the surrounding landscape. Several tall palm trees stand prominently on the left and right sides of the frame. In the middle ground, a green golf course is visible, with a few more palm trees and a small building in the distance. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

# Muddied waters

Contradictory rules regarding fertilization practices have stirred up controversy and confusion in the state of Florida.

Stacie Zinn Roberts



Photo © Montana Pritchard



The University of Florida's J. Bryan Unruh, Ph.D., leads a field day presentation. Photo courtesy of Bryan Unruh

Fertilizer blackout periods, conflicting ordinances and mandatory regulations that plague and perplex turf industry experts are now the norm in the Sunshine State.

It all began with a sentence.

As J. Bryan Unruh, Ph.D., tells it, a sentence misconstrued by a well-meaning, if misguided, group of environmentalists changed how and when Florida homeowners, landscapers and golf course superintendents can fertilize their grass. Fertilizer blackout periods, conflicting ordinances and mandatory regulations that plague and perplex turf industry experts are now the norm in the Sunshine State. Don't think it can happen where you live and work? Think again.

More than a decade ago, the University of Florida published the first edition of the "Florida Lawn Handbook," edited by Unruh, now professor and Extension turfgrass specialist in environmental horticulture and associate center director at the West Florida Research and Education Center at the University of Florida in Jay, and Laurie Trenholm, Ph.D., professor in the environmental horticulture department at UF in Gainesville. Both are widely regarded in Florida as turf experts.

"If we go back to when the blackout periods first originated, most of those all stem out from the "Florida Lawn Handbook," which had a sentence that read, 'Do not fertilize when rain is imminent.' Let the storm pass. The environmental groups came back with, 'Rain is imminent every day in the rainy season,' and that's where these blackout ordinances came from," Unruh says.

It rains a lot in Florida. For years it's been common knowledge that during the summer rainy season on the Gulf Coast you should get off the beach by 2:45 p.m. because at 3 p.m. on the dot the skies open up, lightning strikes, and you'll be drenched. These aren't just light sprinkles, either. The summer rains in Florida are monumental downpours that can dump inches — yes, inches — in a matter of minutes. Then, some 15 minutes to an hour later, the clouds dissipate, blue skies return, and all is right with the world — that is, unless you're a landscaper or golf course superintendent needing to fertilize your turf between June and September.

The first rumblings of fertilizer discontent began in January 2000 in St. Johns County, which includes the large city of Jacksonville, and was directly linked to water quality in the St. Johns River. At that time, the county passed fertilizer restrictions that limited how and when fertilizer could be applied to lawns.

Industry organizations, including the Florida GCSA, the Florida Turfgrass Association (FTGA), the Turfgrass Producers of Florida, (TPF, formerly known as the Florida Sod Growers Cooperative) and other allied associations, reached out to the University of Florida turf specialists to form a plan. In October 2000, representatives from all sectors of the turf industry got together and formed a committee that would eventually write a set of science-based guidelines called the Green Industry Best Management Practices (BMPs) for Florida turfgrass maintenance. That document was released in 2002.

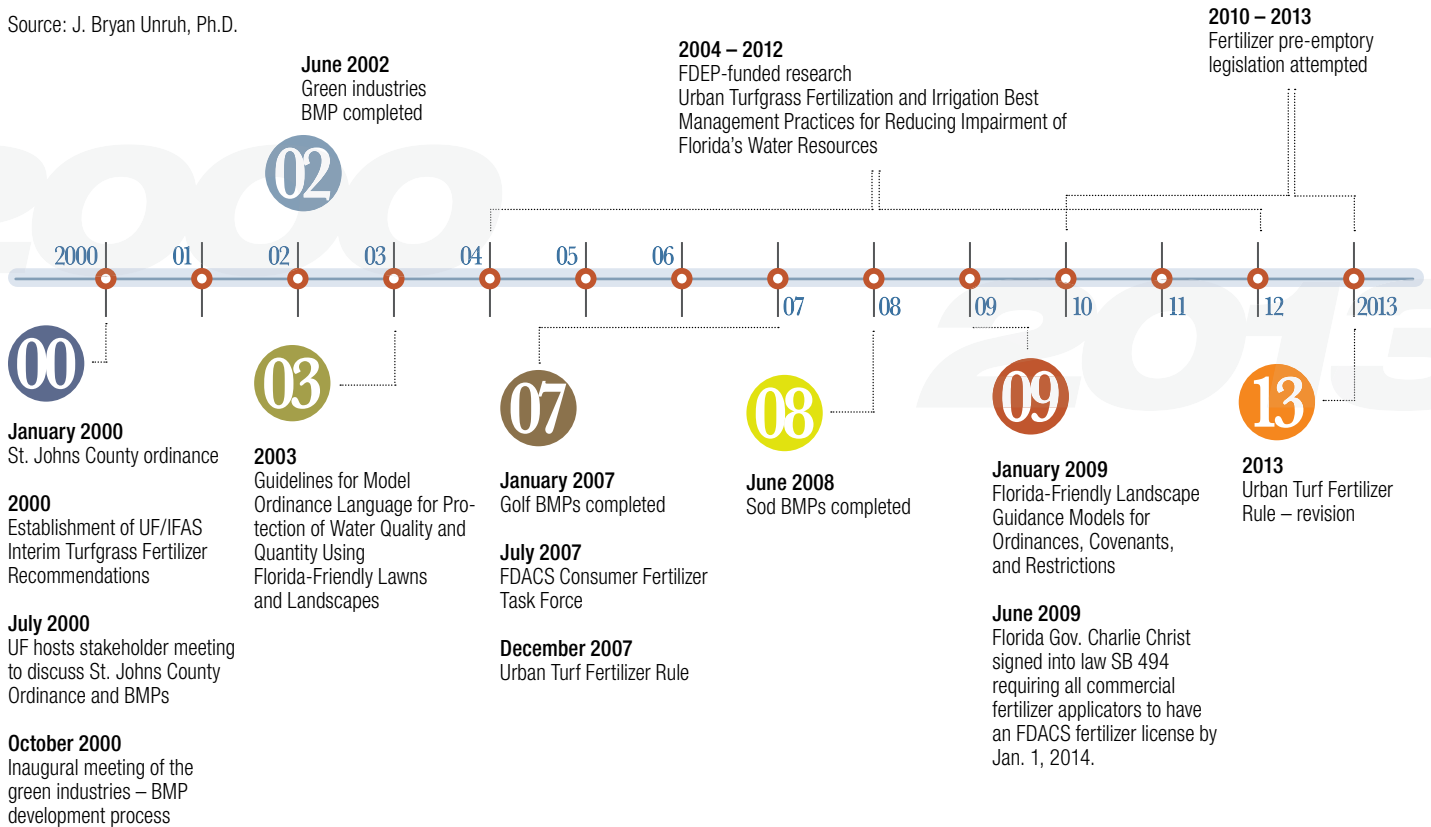
In the meantime, the issue gained momentum. County governments and local municipalities in every corner of the state placed fertilizer ordinances on their meeting agendas.



A 2003 model ordinance recommended that golf should not be placed under the same fertilizer restrictions as Florida homeowners. The non-binding ordinance left the door open for stricter rules, however. Photo © Montana Pritchard

# A fertilizer ordinance timeline

Source: J. Bryan Unruh, Ph.D.



W. Craig Weyandt is the superintendent at The Moorings Yacht & CC. Photo courtesy of Craig Weyandt

The industry got together again to craft separate golf BMPs and sod production BMPs, and the state adopted Guidelines for Model Ordinance Language for Protection of Water Quality and Quantity Using Florida-Friendly Lawns and Landscapes in 2003 to serve as a non-binding guideline for local governments. The model ordinance recommended that golf not be placed under the same restrictions as landscapes and, for the most part, golf has been exempt in most ordinances. Unfortunately, the non-binding nature of the model ordinance left the door open for stricter rules from county to county and city to city.

Todd Josko is the lobbyist for the FTGA and is president of Josko Public Affairs and Communications based in Tampa.

“Florida is unique in that there is no statewide rule,” Josko says. “In most of the country, states have state statutes, statewide rules will be one rule. Florida allows each local government or county or municipality to make its own rules. It’s a horrible idea and a horrible precedent in that 67 counties and 411 municipalities could all have their own rules. They contradict one another within a county and create a labyrinth of rules and regulations that professionals need to navigate.”

The impetus for the environmentalist out-

cry is directly related to water quality standards required by the federal Department of Environmental Protection and the Clean Water Act. In order to be in compliance with the act, government agencies must meet certain numeric benchmarks for clean water, explains Greg Phenegar, GCSAA Class A director of golf course management at John’s Island Club. Phenegar is a past president of the FTGA and Florida GCSA, as well as the current FGCSA government relations committee chair.

“One way to get points is to restrict fertilizer,” says Phenegar, who is a 27-year member of GCSAA.

The kicker is that most water pollution is considered nonpoint-source pollution. This means, in frank terms, they just don’t know exactly where it’s coming from. It’s a guess. Nonpoint-nitrogen pollution from thousands of individually owned leaky septic tanks, Phenegar says, is a lot harder to regulate than fertilizer applications. Therefore, fertilizer tends to be the first target of regulation. Just about everyone interviewed for this story characterized fertilizer as “low-hanging fruit” in the list of possible pollution sources. Phenegar says regulating fertilizer is something local governments can do to “make yourself feel good because you’ve done something, like putting a Band-



Greg Phenegar is the director of golf course management at John's Island Club in Florida's Indian River County. Photo courtesy of Greg Phenegar

Aid over a leak in a dike.”

This is not to say that water quality is not an issue in Florida. Some bodies of water are genuinely threatened because of nonpoint-source nitrogen and other pollutants.

“I’m for water quality. I fish. I drink water. I need it to survive. But I want what they’re basing their ordinances on to be science-based,” Phenegar says.

At John’s Island, Phenegar manages three golf courses. Two of the courses are in the city of Indian River Shores. The third course is in Indian River County. The county and city have conflicting restrictions. Indian River Shores follows the model ordinance, based on science that exempts golf, but the county adopted a blackout period that also requires at least 50 percent slow-release fertilizer on all common areas, around the clubhouse, croquet court and landscaping. To cope with the conflicting rules, Phenegar says he’s compartmentalized his 70-person crew as to who can do which tasks where and actually removed turf in certain areas, replacing it with ornamentals, to reduce confusion.

Not too far away from Phenegar’s facility, also in Indian River County, is The Moorings Yacht & Country Club. GCSAA Class A superintendent W. Craig Weyandt, who is also

a Florida Master Naturalist, has been an outspoken proponent for keeping golf courses out of the fertilizer restrictions. His course borders the Indian River Lagoon, a 156-mile-long body of water that is home to 700 species of fish. Weyandt says the lagoon is “nutrient impaired” and he cares deeply about the health of the waterway. Yet, he believes that it’s not the golf courses along the water that have threatened the health of the lagoon. Imposed buffer zones along the water that help keep fertilizer apps where they’re needed, and out of the water, are standard practice for superintendents in the area. Recent scientific surveys back up Weyandt, a 23-year GCSAA member, and his fellow superintendents.

The Ocean Research and Conservation Association recently conducted a test using a water-quality monitoring device called a Killyroy on the Indian River Lagoon. Weyandt says the device, used to measure salinity, temperature and pollution, actually showed the water adjacent to golf courses on the lagoon to be “cleaner” than in other areas tested.

Still, no matter the scientific evidence, emotions run high when it comes to environmental issues. Weyandt says following meetings where he’s spoken on behalf of the golf industry he’s been “verbally attacked” and has received some

nasty letters from the opposing side.

Unruh has witnessed similar tactics. “The environmental groups, the Sierra Club, put people on a bus holding up signs that say if you fertilize your lawn, you’re killing manatees. It’s all emotional. That’s been a challenge for our side. An emotional response can never be combatted with a logical response. It won’t win,” Unruh says.

Phenegar says he’s heard that Hernando County, north of Orlando, is considering an ordinance that includes restricting golf course fertilizer on the playing surfaces, and other governments may be looking at golf, too.

The best defense the industry can take against these kinds of restrictions, says Josko, is to “get out ahead of the issue.”

Josko helped the FTGA and allied associations to craft a plan to educate local governments about the benefits of proper fertilization regimens, pushing the state model ordinance as a framework, and keeping golf out of the mix. Since 2010, Josko reports that nine local governments have passed blackout periods and 44 have adopted the DEP model.

The FGCSA helped to create a BMP certification program for golf course superintendents. According to Ralph Dain, GCSAA’s field staff representative for the Florida region,



Darren J. Davis, the superintendent at Olde Florida GC, has been active in a grass-roots campaign to exempt golf from confusing ordinances banning fertilizers in Collier County. Photo courtesy of Darren Davis

“The planning for the BMP manual began in 2002-2007. From 2009 to 2012, a certification program was created that reinforces the BMP standards and tests superintendents to become certified in the BMPs. This certification is accredited by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. So far, since 2012, about 30 percent of Florida superintendents have sat for the exam,” Dain says, adding that 275 members have taken the exam and 200 have passed.

Darren J. Davis is the GCSAA Class A superintendent at Olde Florida Golf Club in Naples, located in Collier County on Florida’s west coast. Davis is a past president of both the FGCSA and the FTGA. He currently serves on the GCSAA Board of Directors and is a 24-year member of the national association. On a local level, when Collier County government officials were debating fertilizer bans that could have included golf playing surfaces, Davis and other local superintendents who are members of the Everglades Chapter of the FGCSA (including Tim Hiers at Old Collier, Matt Taylor at Royal Poinciana and Mark Black at Quail West Country Club, among others) made calls to local officials, personally visited them at their offices to drop off copies of the golf BMPs, and reached out to friends and neighbors who had personal relationships with decision makers. The efforts were effective: Golf was exempted from the ordinance. Similar grassroots cam-

paigns among other FGCSA chapters have had similar positive outcomes.

At the national level, Davis says that GCSAA, through the Environmental Institute for Golf, “is actively involved in gathering data and research to tell the true story of the impacts of golf. We’ve done a series of environmental surveys that show the true story and the positive effect that golf courses have on the environment.”

In part to try to right the wrong committed by the misuse of the now infamous sentence, Unruh and Trenholm published an article in October 2012 titled “Potential Unintended Consequences Associated with Urban Fertilizer Bans in Florida — A Scientific Review” in the peer-reviewed journal *HortTechnology*. The basis of the article is that nonpoint-source pollution comes from a variety of sources, “from dog poop, to leaf litter to septic systems,” and that restricting fertilizer alone will not solve Florida’s water-quality issues.

Josko admits the fertilizer ban, and all of its repercussions, will not go away soon — or quietly.

“Florida is a very sensitive state when it comes to water quality,” Josko says. “It’s an issue that cuts through political parties and philosophies. It’s important to be proactive in the golf course industry to develop relationships with elected officials to make sure they know the dedication of the industry and environmental

stewardship of golf. They need to look at the golf course superintendent as friends and solutions, not enemies to water quality.”

These relationships need to be established long before the issue raises its head in a superintendent’s community, he says, “not the week before the public hearing to decide these things.” “By then, it’s too late,” Josko adds. “The first person they think of to contact should not be the Sierra Club. It needs to be the superintendent who is the true environmental steward. That’s what the GCSAA should be shooting for across the country.”

Just because your state might not currently be facing these issues does not mean it’s safe. Josko warns, “Activist groups are on the record saying golf is next.”

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