

WAUKESHA

Flood relief: Bush orders federal aid to 5 counties. **2B**

Off the Cuffs: Mail-order revolver winds up in the wrong hands. **3B**

Review: Country embraces a nice guy in Paisley. **Encore/6B**

City to ban some fertilizer

Oconomowoc, others try to improve lakes' quality by restricting phosphorus use

By **KAY NOLAN**
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Concerned about the proliferation of weeds and algae in its chain of lakes, Oconomowoc has banned property owners from using phosphorus to fertilize lawns in what one official said is a regional trend.

The ban, approved last Tuesday, takes effect in January. It affects all residential and commercial properties in the city, including golf courses. It allows exemptions for newly seeded or sodded lawns and for

smaller vegetable or flower gardens.

In addition to individual municipalities, such as the cities of Pewaukee and Delafield, some counties in Wisconsin, including Dane and Jefferson, have enacted or are considering similar restrictions. Yet Mark Watkins, director of Jefferson County's Land and Water Conservation Department, said a countywide ban might be hard to enforce because fertilizers are mostly sold in municipalities, rather than in the rural areas where the county has more influ-

ence over use.

Watkins said Jefferson County has passed resolutions in support of a proposed statewide law against phosphorus use.

A hearing on proposed Senate Bill 197 is planned for Tuesday in Madison. Sponsors of the bill are proposing to ban not only the use but the sale of phosphorus fertilizers in Wisconsin, except for agricultural purposes.

Lawn care companies have responded to the growing concern

over phosphorus. Matt Stroik, service manager for the Milwaukee branch of Scott's Lawn Service, said the company changed last year to phosphorus-free fertilizers.

"We were told by our corporate office — they do studies — that they found there is an abundance of phosphorus in our soil and there is no need to put phosphorus back into the soil," said Stroik, referring to the Midwest.

Please see **OCONOMOWOC, 5B**

Recognizing trends, stories that make a difference:

I latched on to this story about banning phosphorus in fertilizer while attending a night meeting in the small city of Oconomowoc, where I was covering a completely separate topic. I sensed this was a **trend** story, and followed up the next day. It turned out that similar bans were indeed being debated -- not only in the greater Milwaukee area, but throughout the state, and in fact, the state Senate was to have a hearing on the matter in just days. **We were able to do a timely Page 1B story, followed by an editorial.** Two other reporters from community newspapers were at the same Oconomowoc meeting, but neither picked up on the phosphorus issue.

From page 1

OCONOMOWOC

Phosphorus ban starts in 2008

Tom Steinbach, operating manager for Oconomowoc's wastewater utility, said the ban was proposed in 2006 after residents raised concerns about lake quality. "Oconomowoc is pretty much a lake community," he said. "We deal with lake weeds on a daily basis in the summer."

Steinbach said phosphorus levels have been increasing in the Oconomowoc River chain of lakes, which include Okauchee, Oconomowoc and Fowler lakes, along with Lac La Belle.

A state Department of Natural Resources spokesman, however, said reducing phosphorus will have little effect on lake weeds, but he said it will cut down on algae problems, which also

have been increasing.

"Phosphorus poses a very real concern to area lakes — there's no argument about that," said Carroll Schaal, lake team leader for the DNR. "If phosphorus is being spread very near the lake, every time there's a good rainstorm there's excess phosphorus leaving the shore land to get in the lake."

Algae, with its slimy appearance, "spoils a lot of people's trips to the lake this time of year," said Schaal. The blue-green type of algae, which is also proliferating statewide, can be toxic.

Reducing phosphorus will have a lesser effect on reducing lake weeds, he said. "Like root plants on shore, lake weeds, the ones that are rooted, are probably pulling nitrogen as their main nutrient out of the lake sediment."

Common fertilizer contains a combination of phosphorus, nitrogen and potassium, Schaal said. "If I were to do it, I'd say, really don't apply any fertilizer within 35, 40 feet of a lake, period. Because even the nitrogen could run off and stimulate the plants in the lake."

EDITORIALS

RUNOFF POLLUTION

Tougher action needed

Communities such as Oconomowoc are taking a positive step by banning phosphorus to fertilize lawns. Better would be a statewide ban on the sale of such fertilizers.

The Waukesha County cities of Oconomowoc, Delafield and Pewaukee are among Wisconsin communities that, to their credit, have taken an important step to make sure nearby lakes and streams remain healthy. By banning property owners from using phosphorus to fertilize lawns (Oconomowoc's ban takes effect in January), these communities and some counties that have joined them are ensuring that phosphorus won't become a part of runoff pollution into area waterways.

Phosphorus is a plant nutrient that, like nitrogen in fertilizers, serves to stimulate plant growth. But soil in the Midwest already contains naturally adequate levels of phosphorus. And given that phosphorus runoff contributes to the growth of algae in lakes and other waterways, banning such fertilizers makes sense, especially since the algae can choke waterways and since some of it is toxic.

While manicured green lawns are a stereotype of subdivisions and golf courses, those lawns don't require phosphorus to be green and healthy. In fact, responding to the concern over phosphorus, some lawn care companies such as Scott's Lawn Service in Milwaukee have changed to phosphorus-free fertilizers.

Nor are communities, counties and companies alone: In Madison this week, there was a hearing on a bill that would ban the sale of phosphorus fertilizers in Wisconsin, except for agricultural purposes. If this is a growing trend, we hope legislators join it soon and pass the statewide ban.

Tom Steinbach, operating manager for Oconomowoc's wastewater utility, told the Journal Sentinel's Kay Nolan that phosphorus levels have been rising in the Oconomowoc River chain of lakes, which include Lac La Belle, Okauchee, Oconomowoc and Fowler lakes (www.jsonline.com/652353).

The problem is real, according to Carroll Schaal, lake team leader for the state Department of Natural Resources: "If phosphorus is being spread very near the lake, every time there's a good rainstorm there's excess phosphorus leaving the shore land to get in the lake."

In fact, Schaal argues that property owners shouldn't be spreading any fertilizer within 35 to 40 feet of a lake or stream, since even the nitrogen in phosphorus-free fertilizer can run off and stimulate plants in the water. That's good advice for all property owners and perhaps worthy of legislation banning such practices.

What should state and local officials do to reduce runoff pollution from lawn fertilizers into nearby watersheds? E-mail jsedit@journalsentinel.com



MCT

Property owners should pay attention to what's in the fertilizer they use on their lawns to avoid runoff that could have a negative effect on waterways.