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New Legislation to Regulate Use of Phosphorus on Established Lawns in Connecticut

In May of 2012, the Connecticut legislature passed Public Act No. 12-155 that addresses the application of fertilizers containing phosphorus on established lawns. The Act is effective January 1, 2013. The legislation was sponsored by State Senator Andrew Rorabeck (R-30) and State Representative Clark Chapin (R-67), who are ranking members on the General Assembly's Environment Committee. This bill requires a soil test performed within the previous two years indicating phosphate is needed before phosphorus from fertilizer, amendments or compost can be applied to lawns. Fertilizers, soil amendments and compost containing 0.67% or less phosphate are not regulated under this Act.

Many people are not aware that phosphorus pollution is the principle cause of declining water quality in Connecticut's lakes and ponds. The phosphorus that contaminates our water bodies comes mainly from inappropriately applied fertilizers (both bagged fertilizers and organic amendments like compost) and faulty septic systems. Phosphorus can be carried into water sources by both surface and subsurface runoff, as well as leaching. In some cases, specific sources of phosphorus pollution (point source pollution) can be identified. More often than not, phosphorus contamination comes from a variety of sources – home lawns, farm fields, septic systems adjacent to water bodies - with none at great enough levels to be singled out (non-point source pollution).

Many local economies depend on clean water for tourism, fishing and bait shops, adjacent restaurants and other local stores and venues. It is critical to keep our ponds and lakes clean and clear. Improper phosphorus management results in algal blooms, fish kills, weedy and uninviting lakes, and even health risks to humans. In other words, phosphorus pollution is a job killer! Many folks visit our New England states because they consider them quaint and pristine, and our long-standing environmental regulations have kept them that way.

The new legislation would:

- 1) Prohibit the application of fertilizers, soil amendments and compost containing phosphate to **established lawns** except when “(A) A **soil testing** method approved by the Commissioner of Agriculture and performed within the **previous two years** indicates the soil is **lacking in phosphorus** and fertilizer, soil amendments or compost containing phosphate is needed for the growth of such lawn, or (B) such fertilizer, soil amendment or compost containing phosphate is used for establishing **new grass or repairing such lawn with seed or sod.**”

NOTE: Any fertilizer, compost, or soil amendment that contains **0.67% or less phosphate** is exempt from this legislation and can be used.

The law also states:

- 2) Fertilizers containing phosphate **shall not** be applied to lawns between December 1 and March 15. (NOTE: UConn recommends applications of any fertilizer only between April 15 and October 15, when plants are actively growing)
- 3) Fertilizers containing phosphorus shall not be applied to any portion of lawn that is located **20 feet or less** from any brook, stream, river, lake, pond, sound, or any other body of water, except if such fertilizer, soil amendment or compost is applied with the use of a drop spreader, rotary spreader with a deflector or targeted spray liquid, such application may occur on any portion of lawn that is located **not less than fifteen feet** from any brook, stream, river, lake pond, sound or any other body of water.
- 4) No person shall apply any fertilizer, soil amendment, or compost that contains phosphate to any **impervious surface**.
- 5) For use by the general public or posting and distribution at retail points of sale, the Commissioner of Agriculture may approve consumer information on use restrictions and best practices for fertilizer, soil amendments and compost that contain phosphate.

This law will be enforced by the CT Department of Agriculture. A fine will be applied to all who violate SB 440 phosphorus restrictions or retail requirements. These restrictions do not apply to land classified as **agricultural, or to golf courses**.

Those who routinely apply fertilizer to their lawns should find products both with and without phosphorus at their local garden centers or other retail establishments. Keep in mind that when putting in a new lawn using either seed or sod, or overseeding an established lawn, phosphorus is both necessary and allowed. Those using natural/organic fertilizers will be most challenged because it is much easier to manufacture synthetic fertilizers that do not include phosphorus in them than it is to remove phosphorus from an organic fertilizer or soil amendment such as alfalfa meal or compost.

Anyone with comments or questions can contact the UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Lab (860) 486-4274 or Dr. Thomas Morris (860) 486-0637.

[Click here to view the legislation.](#)