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Scotts drops phosphorus from lawn fertilizer

Marysville company acts to reduce risk of runoff feeding toxic-algae blooms in lakes; competitors likely to follow its lead

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Scotts Miracle-Gro employee Chris Riehl fertilizes a lawn in Powell. The lawn-care industry accounts for less than 10 percent of the phosphorus dissolved in U.S. waterways.

By [Mary Vanac](#)

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Scotts Miracle-Gro has removed phosphorus from its popular Turf Builder line of lawn fertilizer to help reduce the type of harmful algae blooms that have plagued waterways such as Grand Lake St. Marys and Lake Erie.

The Marysville maker of lawn-and-garden products sees the move as a milestone for its industry, which it says is partly responsible for the phosphorus runoff that feeds one of the nation's most costly and challenging environmental problems — nutrient pollution.

"As consumers feed their lawns this spring, they should know they can get great results from our products while also protecting and preserving our water resources," said Jim Lyski, Scotts' chief marketing officer, in a written statement.

Harmful algae blooms in coastal areas of the United States are estimated to have a yearly negative economic cost of at least \$82 million, mostly because of their effects on public health and commercial fisheries, according to a 2006 report by the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science.

In many Ohio waterways, agricultural fertilizers and animal manure are the biggest sources of dissolved phosphorus, said Jeff Reutter, the Ohio State University professor who directs the Ohio Sea Grant College program and OSU's Stone Laboratory. Both study water quality in the Great Lakes.

The lawn-care industry accounts for less than 10 percent of the phosphorus dissolved in U.S. waterways, Reutter said. Because Scotts is a dominant player in the turf-care industry, fertilizer companies that haven't already removed phosphorus from their products are likely to follow its lead.

"We're assuming this is going to take care of 95 percent of the lawn-care industry," Reutter said. "It is very significant that Scotts has taken this action," he said. "In some bodies of water, lawn-care runoff can be a very significant source of phosphorus. That is not the case in Lake Erie, but this shows farmers that they are not being singled out for action. This is a way for all of us to do our part."

Phosphorus, also known as phosphate, is one of three primary turf nutrients, according to Pennsylvania State's College of Agricultural Sciences. Many soils are rich in phosphorus; however, the nutrient often is unavailable to grasses because it binds with other elements or clay.

At least 11 states — Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin — have banned the use or sale of phosphorus for lawn maintenance, according to Connecticut's Office of Legislative Research.

As part of the Ohio Lake Erie Phosphorus Task Force, Scotts committed to halving the amount of phosphorus in its turf fertilizer after meeting with interested parties in 2006.

"Nutrients are definitely a concern in our water resources," said Gail Hesse, executive director of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission, which works to protect the lake's water quality and ecosystem. "We applaud Scotts'



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effort to be responsive to the issues of water quality."

Scotts researchers learned that there is enough phosphorus in most soils to grow healthy turf, especially when grass clippings are left on lawns, said Bruce Caldwell, who leads global research and development at the Marysville company.

The company's researchers also found that healthy turf is a major barrier to phosphorus runoff during heavy rains, Caldwell said.

Scotts uses packaging and retail displays to teach consumers how to use its fertilizer for maximum benefit and minimal environmental impact, Caldwell said. The company also has added what it calls EdgeGuard technology to its spreaders to keep fertilizer off sidewalks and driveways, where it might more easily wash into water systems.

"We think that's our responsibility — to make it easy for people to do the right thing for their landscape ... and they're doing that in a positive environmental practice," Caldwell said.

The phosphorus-free Turf Builder already is on the shelves of many retailers, including Home Depot, said Scotts spokesman Lance Latham.

However, the packages do not say the fertilizer is "phosphorus-free." Consumers can be sure they're getting a zero-phosphorus product by checking the N-P-K nutrient mix on the bags, Caldwell said. The "P" in the mix stands for the amount of phosphorus it contains. So a phosphorus-free product would list this value as "0."

mvanac@dispatch.com

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