

Suffolk proposal would restrict use of fertilizer

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A proposed Suffolk County law aims to limit pollution of bays, rivers and drinking water by reducing the use of nitrogen-based fertilizer on lawns, ballfields and golf courses.

The bill, which county officials said would be submitted to the legislature by the end of the week, places some restrictions on fertilizer use but mostly focuses on educating landscapers and county residents about the environmental consequences of fertilizer overuse.

"You can keep a nice lawn but you don't have to go overboard with the fertilizer, which eventually percolates back into our groundwater," County Executive Steve Levy said at a news conference yesterday.

Levy and environmental supporters said the bill was the most cost-effective way to address nitrogen pollution, which has led to algal blooms and fishkills in degraded waterways such as Mastic's Forge River.

Nitrogen can also leach through the soil to pollute groundwater. This year federal drinking water standards for nitrogen were exceeded at 15 Suffolk public supply wells and at 10 percent of private wells, Levy said. Public drinking water is treated to achieve federal standards before it reaches consumers.

The measure would ban fertilizer applications between November and April, when the ground is often too cold to absorb nutrients, which then leach more easily into groundwater or are washed down into storm drains. Fertilizer would be eliminated at county properties such as parks and office complexes. County athletic fields and fairways would get minimal applications of slow-release fertilizers, which cause less environmental damage.

The plan would cost \$187,000 to set up, and \$50,000 annually thereafter, the county estimated.

Licensed landscapers would be required to take a turf management course, with costs to be mostly covered by the county. Existing consumer education campaigns would be expanded to promote "low-maintenance" lawns and require retailers to post signs on the risks of nitrogen-based fertilizer.

Joseph Gergala, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau, said he didn't expect the bill to impose hardships on farmers or landscapers and called the measure "an appropriate response" to water quality concerns.