

# The Northeast Voluntary Turf Fertilizer Initiative



**STRATEGY:** Nutrient pollution and corresponding water quality problems have been of high level concern for states and EPA for years, and many initiatives have been pursued to control sources of phosphorus and nitrogen. Recently, momentum has been building nationally to regulate the nutrient content of turf fertilizers intended for non-agricultural applications. In the Northeast, the State of Vermont and the State of New York each recently enacted state wide turf fertilizer laws limiting the nutrient content of these products. At a meeting in May of 2011, the New England environmental agency commissioners agreed that they would like to see a regional approach to turf fertilizer that would involve working with industry and other stakeholders to develop voluntary, scientifically sound guidelines pertaining to fertilizer formulation, sales, application and outreach.

## **Objectives and Methodology**

The purpose of this strategy document is to identify the specific tasks that need to be addressed in order to successfully engage stakeholders and to develop mutually agreeable voluntary guidelines. Through implementation of this strategy, NEIWPCC will work with state and EPA partners and with various turf fertilizer industry and non-industry stakeholders in order to discuss issues of concern and to develop mutually agreeable guidelines related to various aspects of turf fertilizer industry (manufacture, sales, application, etc.) and water quality.

### **Objective I: Coordinate State/EPA turf fertilizer initiative workgroup**

#### **Target Dates: Ongoing throughout project period**

NEIWPCC will coordinate meetings and conference calls with a workgroup of state and federal agency staff specifically on this initiative and its progress. The workgroup will play key roles in the identification of key stakeholders, assisting with stakeholder outreach, assisting in the development of stakeholder meeting agendas, and representing their agency at the stakeholder meetings.

### **Objective II: Compile list of stakeholders and contact information. Conduct basic outreach on initiative process and goals.**

#### **Target Dates: January – April 2012**

Through research conducted to date, NEIWPCC and the states have identified nine types of stakeholder with interest in turf fertilizer and its impact on water quality. Those types are:

- 1) Manufacturers of chemical turf fertilizers who distribute products through the retail market
- 2) Manufacturers of natural and organic turf fertilizers who distribute products through the retail market
- 3) Manufacturers of turf fertilizers who sell products through the professional turf market
- 4) Members of the association for golf course superintendents and members of various state and regional associations for lawn care professionals, golf course superintendents, private landscaping companies.
- 5) Retailers that sell fertilizer to homeowners
- 6) Municipalities - particularly those facing RDA stormwater permits with strict nutrient limits (the Upper Charles River Watershed in MA, the South Portland area in ME, the Burlington area in VT), POTW operators, regional associations that focus on wastewater and other municipal concerns (e.g. NEWEA)
- 7) University extensions and other agronomy experts
- 8) Members of the public and watershed associations with interest in implementing turf fertilizer guidelines.
- 9) Homeowners' associations, state and regional associations of homebuilders and other private entities that potentially face increasing costs related to post-construction stormwater discharges.

NEIWPCCC will conduct research to compile a reasonably comprehensive contact list of stakeholders belonging to each group. Special emphasis will be given to identify and find contacts for stakeholders that are headquartered in the New England region or that have a visible presence/market share within the region.

NEIWPCCC will coordinate an initial outreach that will involve emailing all members of the compiled contact list with basic information about the goals and the structure of the New England Regional Turf Fertilizer Initiative. NEIWPCCC will also serve as a point of contact for stakeholders with questions about the initiative. This initial outreach will be followed with invitations (either by email or by phone) to the sector-specific stakeholder meetings (see Objective III).

Further, NEIWPCCC will create and maintain a webpage with basic information about the initiative for viewing by stakeholders and the general public.

**Objective III: Organize and facilitate four sector-specific stakeholder meetings.**

NEIWPCCC and EPA Region 1 will organize and facilitate four sector-specific stakeholder meetings. The meetings will focus on turf fertilizer issues relevant to that specific sector. The objective of each meeting will be to develop mutually agreeable guidelines that are protective of water quality. The state/EPA workgroup will form the meeting agendas with stakeholder input garnered during the initial stakeholder outreach. These meetings will each be one day long, with locations in government-owned buildings throughout the region (to be determined).

- i. The first stakeholder meeting will be with manufacturers of synthetic turf fertilizers that distribute products through the retail market. The meeting will focus on guidelines

related to the nutrient content and labeling of synthetic turf fertilizer products sold at retail. **Target Date: May 2012**

- ii. The second stakeholder meeting will be with manufacturers of natural/organic turf fertilizer products (including products derived from wastewater biosolids) and retailers/interest groups that specialize in the organic market. The meeting is will focus on guidelines related to the nutrient content and labeling of organic and naturally derived turf fertilizer products sold at retail. Discussion may also focus on opportunities to partner on outreach to consumers on environmentally sound fertilization practices. **Target Date: May 2012**
- iii. The third stakeholder meeting will be with watershed groups, university extensions, municipalities and major fertilizer retailers. The meeting will focus on the progress made on guidelines through the first two meetings with manufacturers and on opportunities for outreach to the public to raise awareness of the new guidelines and the anticipated benefits to water quality. Discussion may also focus on the potential for municipalities to teach by example through the turf care practices employed on municipal land. **Target Date: September 2012**
- iv. The fourth stakeholder meeting will be with manufacturers of turf fertilizers that distribute products through the professional market, and with members of the association for golf course superintendents, representatives of commercial fertilizer applicators, and members of various state and regional associations for lawn care professionals. The meeting is will on guidelines related to the nutrient content of the products sold to professionals and appropriate application practices for professional turf care and sports turf maintenance. **Target Date: November 2012**

Stakeholders with an interest in the overall outcome of the entire initiative (e.g. watershed groups, university extensions, municipalities, water-environment professional organizations, private entities that do not directly produce, sell, or apply fertilizer) may be invited to participate in all stakeholder meetings in an informal capacity. These groups would not be directly involved in the creation or negotiation of guidelines because it they will not be party to the guidelines. However, they will be welcome to observe the proceedings and to offer general comment throughout the process.

#### **Objective IV: Translate turf guidelines into formal agreements.**

##### **Target Dates: June – December 2012**

NEIWPCC will work with legal experts at the state and federal environmental agencies and with various stakeholders to translate guidelines developed at the sector specific meetings (and through further discussion as necessary) into formal agreements between the states and the various industry stakeholders (i.e. manufacturers, professional applicators, retailers, etc.). To inform this process, NEIWPCC will research existing MOUs between states and private entities that formalize voluntary commitments by private entities to decrease the environmental impacts of specific products.

## **Objective V: Summit Meeting**

**Target Date: Late 2012 or Early 2013**

NEIWPCCC will work with EPA to coordinate a one-day “summit” meeting of all stakeholder groups and interested members of the public. The purpose of the summit will be to share and publicize the commitments made by various stakeholder groups to reduce the impact of turf fertilizer runoff on water quality (see Objective IV). Ideally, the summit would include high-level representation from the states and from stakeholders and could serve as a forum for signing the MOUs/agreements. The summit could also incorporate public education / training elements relative to turf fertilization (explaining why nutrient levels in fertilizer matter, how to read a fertilizer label, how different types of spreaders work, how to calibrate a spreader, what other factors besides fertilizer can impact the health of a lawn etc.).

## **Objective VI: Online Lawn Fertilization “FAQ” Guide**

**Target Date: Early 2013**

NEIWPCCC will develop an online set of “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) to help homeowners and other “do it yourself” fertilizer applicators understand the potential impacts of lawn maintenance on runoff and water quality and how to minimize those impacts while still maintaining a healthy lawn. The FAQ will be based off existing guidance from university extensions, but will focus on the use of non-technical language and photographs to appeal to an audience of the general public. Once completed, NEIWPCCC will seek to link the guide to appropriate websites (those of state and federal environmental agencies, university extensions, watershed groups, gardening blogs and forums, etc.)