

# Enviros, industry debate bill to ban high nitrogen fertilizer

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Lawn care industry representatives sparred with environmentalists Tuesday over a state bill that would ban high nitrogen fertilizer on Long Island.

At the roundtable discussion sponsored by State Sen. Kemp Hannon (R-Garden City) at Farmingdale State College, environmentalists called the legislation a first step to reduce nitrogen in waterways without a cost to taxpayers, while opponents called the proposed cap arbitrary and ineffective.

Doug Wood, associate director of the Port Washington-based Grassroots Environmental Education, said “it’s the definition of insanity” to spend millions of dollars to limit nitrogen in water and “every spring we have 18-wheelers come over the Throgs Neck bridge loaded up with high-nitrogen fertilizer.”

Fertilizer manufacturer representatives, landscapers and golf course owners said homeowners and business would simply use more fertilizer to get green lawns.

Carol Isles, president of the Long Island Nursery and Landscape Association, said the ban would drive customers to unlicensed contractors who are illegally using high-nitrogen fertilizers.

“We’re a results-driven industry. Customers want results. You have no green, you have no customer,” she said.

The bill would be “wiping out an entire sector of the industry,” said Jeff Fedorchak, vice president of corporate affairs for TruGreen, which represents professional applicators.

The legislation, co-sponsored by Hannon and Assemb. Steven Englebright (D-Setauket), would limit the percentage- of nitrogen in fertilizers to 12 percent of volume. Popular fertilizers currently on sale have 32 percent nitrogen. Farms would be exempt.

After the two-hour hearing, attended by about 50 landscapers and environmental advocates, Hannon said he was undecided on whether to amend the bill or press forward with it in its current form in the remaining weeks of the session.

High nitrogen levels in surface waters have been blamed for algal blooms, depleted shellfish stocks and degraded wetlands, and have become a major policy focus of state and local policymakers.

The primary source of nitrogen is wastewater from unsewered homes’ septic tanks and cesspools, but fertilizers are the second-leading cause, according to David Berg, program manager for the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan, a state and local government initiative.

“We believe fertilizer, unlike wastewater, is going to be a solution that imposes little to no impact on property taxpayers. So it’s important to find a solution there,” Berg said.

The bill passed the Assembly earlier this month with little opposition, but industry representatives said they had been unaware of the bill.

Anthony Leung, regional water engineer for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, said the executive branch was working on a solution that everyone at the table could accept.