

Ripple Effect # 63

CAN WE SUSTAIN ALL OF OUR LAWNS?

In the 1930's, people produced gardens in their yards. Since then, we have produced lawns. One estimate is 25-40 million acres of lawn in the US today. Most of us hold the ideal, moreover, that these 24-40 million acres be lush, weedless lawns of the deepest green!.

With all the technological advancements in lawn care, why, we ask ourselves, are lawns so difficult to maintain? We pay our part to the 40 billion dollar a year lawn industry--yet still don't get the results we want.

And now, with growing awareness of health hazards and environmental degradation associated with pesticides and fertilizers, we face even tougher decisions. Do I use the products that promise me a perfect lawn even if I have children, a pet, or neighbors who may be concerned about what I am applying? Do I use these products even if I know I will be contributing excess nitrates and phosphates to the already endangered Red River Basin's waters?

Some of the choices are being taken out of our hands. Minnesota, along with other states, is already regulating the use of phosphates in lawn care.

We find ourselves, like it or not, part of a larger question: Can we sustain our lawns—all 25-40 million acres of them, with nearly 400,000 acres being added each year? We know that current technologies of lawn care—manufactured fertilizers and pesticides, along with frequent mowing—are heavily dependent on fossil fuels.

We're also hearing about problems with producing grass seed itself. Growing Kentucky seed grass, the ingredient of the typical lawn, requires a burning process that is causing pollution problems in areas of northwest US in which it is grown and, thus, may not in itself be sustainable.

And we're hearing more and more about our waters. About how our local rivers and lakes are becoming impaired, often with an excess of nitrates and phosphates running off from farm lands and lawns alike. About how we may not have the amount of water we're accustomed to—western and southwestern states are already facing measurable declines in available water. Do we have enough water to irrigate an area 25-40 million acres once a week with one inch of water, the rule of thumb for a lawn?

We may not know for certain the answer to our question of whether we can sustain our massive acres of lawn. But we can know that each of us is answering that question through the practices we choose in managing our own lawns.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

