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EDITORIAL

Protect Park's precious waters

The town of Lake George, long at the epicenter of overbuilding in the Adirondacks, has now become a leader in the fight against one of the damaging consequences of sprawl—the surge of nutrients that can virtually smother a lake.

The law is an important part of broader efforts to roll back the damages caused by excessive development and provide lasting protection to the lake.

As of September 1, the town banned the use of lawn fertilizers containing phosphorus, a chemical responsible for algal blooms that can choke previously pristine lakes. In doing so it has shown the way for other Adirondack communities, who should enact their own bans and establish the Park as a model for how to protect our waters from this chemical.

Unfortunately, New York, which recently enacted a statewide ban, postponed the effective date for key fertilizer provisions until 2012. Local governments within the Park should act on their own immediately.

For residents and visitors to Lake George and Lake Champlain, the harm of phosphorus runoff has been painfully apparent. The blue-green slime of algal blooms has appeared on sections of each lake surface in recent summers. As a bloom grows, bits of algae break off and sink to the depths, where bacteria feast on them and in the process consume the oxygen that is essential to the lake-bottom habitat, including cold-water fish like lake trout and land-locked salmon. With its oxygen depleted, areas can become dead zones like one in the South Basin of Lake George, unable to support the fish or contribute to the life of the lake.

Though the algal bloom might look like a natural event, it is, in fact, a form of pollution—a runaway process fed by excessive nutrients that started life in man-made products like lawn fertilizer or dishwasher detergent.

The phosphorus from these products finds its way to lakes and ponds in storm runoff or through overwhelmed sewage-treatment plants. It joins naturally occurring phosphorus that washes into the lakes in unnaturally large amounts because the rain that carried it sluiced off asphalt and concrete instead of soaking into the ground. With all of this souped-up food entering the water, algae go on a growth spurt that slimes shorelines, clouds the water, and kills deep-water habitat. In some cases, the algae create a toxin that in large amounts can sicken mammals, including people.

This process is known as eutrophication, and it is only one of many threats to the water quality of the Adirondacks. Over the decades, clear-cutting, dam-building, acid rain, invasive species, and road salt have all taken their toll on the waters of the Adirondacks. Protecting the watershed was

a principal reason the state created the Adirondack Park, and fighting these threats is a never-ending responsibility.

Clear, invigorating waters are at the heart of the Park's natural riches. And they have long been the lifeblood of the region's economy. The Forest Preserve and the Park came into existence in the nineteenth century as the state sought to protect the mountain water system. And from the followers of nineteenth-century writers Nessmuk and Seneca Ray Stoddard to today's many backcountry paddlers, tourists have found their way to the Adirondacks to enjoy its incomparable waterways. Just as in the 1880s, the Park cannot tolerate assaults on the quality of our water.

Eutrophication is a particular threat in Lake George and Lake Champlain, but across the Park we must prevent the invasion of nutrients into vulnerable waters. We need to be especially careful in areas where development is spreading in the watersheds surrounding popular lakes.

Compared with acid rain, which had to be fought with large-scale industrial changes across many states, phosphorus pollution is a fairly manageable problem. Its solution requires only enlightened local policies. Even individuals can take meaningful action.

Local planners can go a long way toward protecting waterways by requiring smart-development practices that minimize storm-water runoff and use natural vegetation and soils to filter nutrients before they reach waterways.

The town of Lake George's ban on phosphorus fertilizers fits into a larger campaign to protect the lake. Advocates like the Fund for Lake George and the Lake George Association are champions of smart-development practices that reduce runoff. An even grander project will restore the wetlands of West Brook, a primary source of nutrients entering Lake George, and transform it into a natural filter and water purifier.

New York recently joined Vermont and fifteen other states in banning phosphorus in dishwasher detergent and restricting the lawn use of fertilizers containing phosphorus. The state phosphorus fertilizer ban will not take effect until January, 1, 2012, and like Lake George's law, it permits their use on new lawns, a loophole that will keep the products in shops. Stores will be required to display the phosphorus fertilizer separately and with signs warning of the legal restrictions on use.

Forgoing these alternatives requires no great sacrifice. Non-polluting products are abundant, effective, and affordable. Likewise, businesses can do just as well selling Scotts' phosphorus-free fertilizer, say, as its polluting variety.

Local governments in the Park should step up as Lake George did by implementing their own bans without waiting for the state law to take effect.

Tom Woodman, Publisher

RESOURCES for protecting our waters

The Adirondack Park contains 2,800 lakes and ponds, 1,500 miles of rivers, and 30,000 miles of brooks and streams. The following publications and websites offer guidelines for keeping these waterways healthy.

The Adirondack Council's Adirondack Waters: Resource at Risk outlines major threats to water quality and proposes safeguards. A digital version of the report is available on the council's website: Adirondackcouncil.org.

The Fund for Lake George's Do-It-Yourself Water Quality: A Landowner's Guide to the Property Management that Protects Lake George provides information on topics including runoff prevention, wetland preservation, and septic-system maintenance. For more information visit fundforlakegeorge.org.

The Adirondack and Vermont chapters of the Nature Conservancy recently published Climate Change in the Champlain Basin, which offers ideas for combating the effects of climate change in the watershed. A digital version is available at nature.org/champlainclimatereport.

To learn more about phosphorus-free fertilizers visit lawntolake.org.

To learn about the Lake Champlain Basin Program visit lcpb.org.