

CUTT

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Do We Really Need Starter Fertilizer?

The thinning of turfgrass is inevitable once Fall sports practice begins. Here in New York and other cool season areas, the wear and tear of soccer, field hockey and football extends into the latter half of Fall when cooling temperatures inhibit seed germination and establishment. Spring seeding is usually the next option. Sports turf managers are familiar with the cycle of autumn sports damage and the need for spring reestablishment. Applications of starter fertilizers are often an integral aspect of this annual cycle.

In recent times these high phosphorus-containing materials have become the subject of justifiable environmental concern because of the risks associated with phosphorus runoff in surface waters. Excessive nutrients disrupt aquatic ecosystems resulting in eutrophication. Even low levels of phosphorus can be detrimental to water quality by stimulating vegetation and algal blooms, making

the water unsuitable for drinking and recreation. The subsequent death and decomposition of this accelerated growth reduces dissolved oxygen, killing fish and other organisms. Although eutrophication does occur naturally, it is often triggered by nutrients associated with human activities.

Obviously, as sports turf managers we strive to make the world a better place, not to contribute to environmental degradation. While research has shown that a dense stand of turf impedes runoff, our routine applications of high-phosphorus “starter” fertilizer may pose risks because we’re applying when turf cover is thin or even non-existent. Nutrients applied to thin turf or bare soil can readily become mobile, fields are typically graded to promote surface drainage and high rainfall amounts increases the potential for runoff and threatens environmental quality.

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