

Turf BMPs

The First Steps Begin in Gainesville

Editor's note: Best Management Practices or BMPs is a buzzword just like Integrated Pest Management, better known as IPM. While IPM has gained some recognition and acceptance in the green industry's battle with environmental groups and regulators, BMPs have largely been ignored... until now. With non-point source pollution and TMDL regulations being discussed and implemented, BMPs may be the only way for the green industry to carry out its business and meet the letter of the law. FTGA President Erica Santella has been sitting on Nitrate Working Group meetings and keeping up to date on proposed and enacted local ordinances dealing with fertilizer use. While golf is not mentioned specifically in this article, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that fertilizer regulations will impact golf courses as well as home lawns in a watershed basin. Can you live with proposed turf BMPs outlined by IFAS researchers John Cisar and George Snyder? Better pay attention, study the recommendations and determine if they will work for your situation.

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On July 7, a meeting in Gainesville was the first step to writing urban turf Best Management Practices (BMPs), which will be a giant force in improving the status of the lawn care industry in the eyes of regulators, legislators, and the public.

Working with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences, Department of Environmental Protection, five water management districts, the University of Florida and IFAS, the industry will develop BMPs to protect itself and make the public more aware of our professionalism and commitment to protecting the environment. The BMPs submitted to the state are a good

starting point, and Steve Dwinell of DACS was scheduled to host the next meeting in September.

While having DEP-endorsed BMPs will not prevent local governments from initiating ordinances, it will give our industry leverage and confidence to show that further regulations are not needed. The green service industry will have to work hard not only to develop BMPs, but provide technician training, and have a public outreach campaign to stress the need for following BMPs for growing strong and healthy turfgrass.

Dr. Terril Nell, chair of the UF environmental sciences department, hosted the meeting, and the industry appreciates his hospitality. In Gainesville, the following agencies were represented: St. Johns Water Management District,

FDACS, DEP, South Florida Water Management District, Suwanee River Water Management District, Florida Extension Service, and IFAS.

Professional association involvement included Florida Nursery Growers Association, Certified Pest Control Operators of Florida, Florida Pest Control Association, SW Florida Certified Pest Control Operators, and Florida Turfgrass Association. Lesco and TradeMark representatives were also present. Through the use of teleconferencing, close to a dozen people in Ft. Lauderdale were able to attend.

Dr. Nell stressed the need for open discussion, and is enthusiastic about working with the industry on developing turf BMPs. Dr. Brian Unruh, who heads the UF turfgrass program at the West Florida REC in Milton, then related a brief history of the Turf Design Team, which was created four years ago. It has 20 faculty members, and cuts across six departments and four locations.

We learned that all publications go through a review every three years, and many of them are long overdue, including Florida Yards & Neighborhood. He mentioned the nutrient subcommittee, chaired by Dr. Laurie Trenholm, which reviews publications and ensures that recommendations are in line with each other. The subcommittee met with the commercial applicators in March, after the Gainesville Field Day.

FYN is the largest-selling publication, and Dr. Unruh discussed its inception. In the early 1980s, xeriscape was a (trademarked) term formed in Colorado. It focused only on water management. Both FYN and Environmental Landscape Management (ELM) are low-input alternatives to traditional lawn and landscape care.

FYN is funded by a grant to Sarasota Bay and is a model that the EPA is looking at. Dr. Unruh felt strongly that FYN and ELM are low-input options, which led to a discussion of the issue of turf quality, and that the turf industry works to manage turf with as low input as possible, since fertilizers and chemicals are not inexpensive.

Dr. Trenholm then handed out the

IFAS fertilizer rate recommendations. The rates provided are for landscape turf only, not golf courses. The largest landscape turf in Florida by far is St. Augustinegrass, with 75 percent of the acreage. Even if zoysiagrass is only 1 percent of the acreage however, this converts to 20,000 acres. The state was broken into three zones: Northern (down to the Ocala area), Central (to Vero Beach and across to Tampa), and Southern. Rates varied for the three zones, and a range was provided for each species. This sheet will be a part of the discussion of overall turf BMPs.

Next up were Steve Dwinell with DACS, and Mike Thomas, a professional engineer with Department of Environmental Protection. Dwinell stated that BMPs are broad and general, but there is a standard procedure. BMPs are adopted by rule, and provide agricultural industries with relief from water-quality regulations. The philosophy now is to *manage* uses, instead of *restrict* uses (along with fines). Both on a federal and state level, agencies are moving away from regulation.

Three Florida laws provide for adoption of BMPs

1. Agriculture, Chapter 597, which does not apply to the greens service industry.

2. Chapter 576, the Fertilizer law, which has provisions for making property holders exempt from ground water quality. The phrase "property holders" is important, since in the service industry, that means our customers.

3. Chapter 403, which appears to be where our industry falls. There is a section for agricultural non-point issues, which DACS works with. Another section deals with the non-agriculture segment, which works on a basin concept, which DEP administers. The basin concept takes into consideration geographic areas, rivers, bays, etc. While the title "nonagricultural" may seem to deal with urban turf, that was not the intent. For interested parties, Chapter 120 tells specially how a rule is adopted.

Currently, no nonagricultural, non-point, DEP rules have been adopted. DEP just took over this area about a year

ago. The intent behind Chapter 403 is this: if an industry is properly practicing its BMPs, then the onus of any water quality failures are on the state agency, not the land holder. Allocation is the basis of all of these rules. For example, if nitrates are shown to be the biggest problem, that is what is worked on first. The goal is to find out where the problem is coming from and how to stop it.

This started a side discussion of the number of basins in the state. The answer was, "it depends." There are really three big basins in the US: the two oceans and the Gulf of Mexico. However, they are untimely broken down into hundreds of basins. BMPs are typically developed for relatively big basins, such as Okeechobee, and St. Johns.

Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) were briefly brought up. TMDLs will be established for each element of impairment, such as nitrates, phosphorus, and pesticides. One set of BMPs could cover all of these impairments, which is the direction the industry wants to move our BMPs.

As those of you who are working with the South Florida Water Management District know, some basins are on a fast track for improvement. The C-11 canal in Broward County has a target date they must meet, or face legal consequences.

A question from industry was, "By adopting BMPs, will the industry be immune from local regulation?"

The question we were all waiting for! The answer is, "No, not direct relief from local regulations. A county, city, municipality, could still implement an ordinance or law."

However, by having BMPs which are endorsed (a technical term) by the state, the industry certainly will have a large degree of credibility when working with local regulators. The leverage and confidence our industry stands to gain is tremendous. So from a practical matter, having industry-developed BMPs will be critical to preventing unnecessary and burdensome ordinances attempting to regulate our industry.

Mike Thomas with DEP suggested that we also need to get our BMPs recognized by DEP, although they would not

be adopted by rule. Remember that rule adoption protects the landholder, not the industry. The industry would be extremely proactive and taking the moral high ground by going through the hard work of developing our own BMPs.

Thomas gave an example of how another industry worked to get its BMPs adopted. It involved blended fertilizer plants, and how in the late 1980s, many of these sites were recognized as having tremendous nutrient runoff problems. DEP, DACS and the Tennessee Valley Authority worked with the Florida Fertilizer and Agricultural Chemical Association to come up with BMPs. The secretary of state at the time said that the BMP plan looked good, and the industry adopted the BMPs.

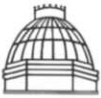
Thomas came on board in 1993, and one of his first projects was to determine how well these BMPs were working in the field. He went to 30 sites around the state, and found a whole range of progress and lack of progress. Where there was good management, understanding, and capital behind them, the BMPs worked.

Some locations had the desire, but not the money or understanding. For example, one location simply paved the surface around their plant, and just moved runoff from one place to another.

Without exception, Ben Hill Griffin's plant in Frostproof was the best plant in the state.

Another problem was that some businesses were not members of the FFACA and were not even aware of the BMP manual for fertilizer plants. Thomas went back to the professional association and worked on not only improving the BMP manual, but also involving nonmembers. FFACA went outside its membership and got everyone up to speed.

FFACA had an Education Outreach Program and hit over 90 percent of the plants. In 1997, a Memorandum of Agreement was signed. This fits in perfectly with our plans of technician training, and working with those currently outside of any professional associations. Remember, that as an industry, we are often judged on the weakest person out there.



The cattlemen are working on their own BMPs, and their goal is to get a letter of endorsement from DEP. Our BMPs would not be formally adopted, but this does not mean that they would not have supreme importance. Imagine the strength in the statement that our industry has Best Management Practices that its members endorse and use. Who would want to use a company not involved in this process? There was a question as to whether BMPs were ever a detriment, or had backfired on an industry. The answer from DACS and DEP both, was a resounding, "No!"

BMPs are not written overnight. They have to be verifiable and need backup. Mark Jennings with the Department of Water Policy, discussed the aquaculture industry.

It is a very diverse group, with food fish, tropical fish, plants, clams, and more. They were divided into commodity groups, and both broad and specific BMPs were developed by the industry. It took time and energy from the industry to accomplish this large task. To reemphasize, BMPs would not give the turf service industry legislative relief, but would give us leverage and credibility. If there is nothing in place, a local regulator would justifiably ask, "Who are you?"

Next we moved onto the definition of BMPs, since there are several. There are Rule BMPs, which are formally adopted and are performance based, and the older, informal based BMPs. "Verification" also has different definitions, depending on the agency involved. Thomas told the group that

DEP is moving somewhat towards Best Professional Judgment, as opposed to monitoring and testing.

Several representatives from water management districts spoke next. Jay Yingling with the Southwest Florida Water Management District felt that the springs and karst areas should be dealt with differently. He also mentioned the Nitrate Remediation Working Group, and the tremendous amount of overlap that occurs in many of these groups.

He also discussed the TMDL, and that the drinking water standard for some nutrients may not be adequate for ecosystems. For example, the drinking water standard for nitrites is 10 ppm, yet flora and fauna are affected a lesser levels.

The industry was next to speak, and the industry is excited about developing its own BMPs. Our professional associations have a lot to offer, not only from input standpoint, but public outreach, and technician training.

Copies of our BMPs were distributed, and briefly reviewed. Dwinell would like to see more numbers: rates, recommendations, etc. These can be references to university publications, as in "See the most recent IFAS Turf recommendations for specific products." This leaves room for professional judgment, while still offering specifics.

One agency representative felt that the document was lacking in irrigation information. The industry is well aware of the part that irrigation plays in plant growth and nutrient movement, and

couldn't agree more! One problem has always been the lack of regulation on installing, maintaining, monitoring and running irrigation systems. It is a very difficult issue for the industry, and has tremendous impact on the amount of inputs required to maintain a Florida lawn.

Bill Donovan with the South Florida Water Management District spoke on general guidelines for BMPs they are looking for, and how soil testing works into their district. He stressed the value of being proactive.

The final segment was on the difference between quality and inputs, and the importance of homeowner education. The green service industry is involved now, and will continue to develop its own BMPs along with the assistance of various agencies. DACS was slated to host the next meeting Sept. 13 in Orlando.

We had a very productive meeting. The industry is ready to develop BMPs and gain credibility, confidence, and leverage. It will not be a quick process, and will involve a tremendous amount of work from the associations and allied members. Education will play a key role. We are taking a proactive role, which will come from a regulatory, legislative, and public relations standpoint.

As a final note, I would like to thank personally Gene Yeady for his role in getting this wide divergence of participants together. Without his hard work and persistence, this meeting would not have happened. We all owe Yeady a debt of gratitude.

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