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Led by a liberal president, the Democrats now rule the roost in Washington. How will the party’s dominance affect the golf course maintenance industry?

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF
While campaigning for president, Barack Obama vowed to change America. Now that Obama has been elected president, the people who make up the golf course maintenance industry wonder how that change could impact what they do for a living.

Some people are alarmed at what Obama and the Democratic-led Congress could do to regulate the industry. In a recent Golfdom online survey that asked questions and opinions about the presidential election, one superintendent responded, “If Obama wins, we’re in big trouble.”

It’s the first time since 1995 that the Democrats control the ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Considering the liberal tendencies of some of those Democrats, many people in the golf course maintenance industry expect there will be changes that will affect how they do their jobs, especially from an environmental standpoint. Those people include everyone from golf course superintendents and club professionals to course architects and builders, as well as the manufacturers who create the products and equipment used to maintain them.

These people wonder if the Democratic-laden government will more heavily regulate what they do. Will superintendents be required to use less fresh water to irrigate? Will superintendents and their crews come under greater scrutiny in regard to pesticide and fertilizer application? Will pesticide and fertilizer companies come under steeper analysis for the products they manufacturer? Could certain pesticides used on golf courses be banned?

Says Mark Woodward, CEO of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, “It will be interesting to see how things shake out” in the next four years with the Democrats in charge.

Woodward says the GCSAA will speak out against any legislation it deems unfair. If the industry must defend any of its maintenance practices, Woodward says the association will present its defense based on “sound science and sound technology that protect the industry and protect our sustainability.”

“The entire industry will have to be vigilant at addressing these issues as they arrive,” Woodward says. “[These issues are not [exclusive] to the GCSAA — they affect the entire golf industry. We all need to show the value that golf courses have for the environment and the communities where they are located.”

Mark Esoda, certified superintendent for the Atlanta (Ga.) Country Club, expects there will be change. But what worries Esoda is that change will happen so quickly that the industry won’t have a chance to react to it.

“My concern is with rapid escalation,” Esoda says. “I’m afraid we won’t be able to keep up with all of the regulations as they come down.”

Neil Cleveland, director of the U.S. Green Business for Bayer Environmental Science, says he’s paying close attention to what could happen on the pesticide front with a more liberal-minded government in place. “Anytime there’s change, whether it’s on the federal, state or local levels, it certainly requires some investigation and thought on our part as to what that change may or may not mean,” Cleveland says.

Mike Suhre, head professional at Oak Brook Golf Club in Edwardsville, Ill., is concerned that increased environmental regulations will result in more expensive eco-friendly maintenance products to be used on golf courses, which could in turn drive up the cost of the game. Then play could decrease and rounds and revenue could drop, he says.

“Hopefully, Obama moves to the middle [to govern],” Suhre adds. “But with a left-wing Congress, golf may be in for a rough ride.”

Allen James, president of RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment), says every president, despite his political affiliations, has moved somewhat to the middle to govern.

“All the way back to Rich Nixon, the political parties have adopted a part-time presidency,” James says, whose association represents manufacturers, formulators and distributors of specialty pesticide and fertilizer products. “He will be pressed Continued on page 29
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by those leaders in Congress who are more radical than he is. And he's going to be pressed by all the environmental groups he has made promises to.

As president of DC Legislative & Regulatory Services, David Crow represents corporations and trade associations on issues related to chemicals and the green industry. Crow says Obama, whom he calls the U.S. Senate's most liberal member the past few years, will be less business-friendly than the previous administration because he and Congress will increase taxes and regulations on businesses, including the golf course maintenance industry.

And that's not all.

"We're going to face a lot more environmental activism," Crow says.

Crow cites the Clean Water Restoration Act, which was introduced by Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.) to "fix" the Clean Water Act. The Clean Water Restoration Act would give the government the authority to govern water bodies in public and private settings, including lakes, ponds and wetlands on golf courses. That means the Environmental Protection Agency could decide input amounts — from pesticides to fertilizers — on turfgrass located near water bodies, Crow says.

"This could mean a mandated reduction

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"We have a darn good story to tell. We just have to get better at telling it."
— MARK WOODWARD
CEO OF THE GCSAA

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in pesticides and fertilizers," Crow says. "This would turn the EPA into a water czar for all state, local and federal water bodies."

Crow says the Clean Water Restoration Act is likely to pass in the next Congress. "And Obama will sign it in a heartbeat," he adds. "If it becomes law, it can change our lives in terms of how we use our products."

Crow and Allen say that several members of Congress, including Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), are anti-pesticide and have an environmental agenda awaiting Obama when he takes office. The big question is whether Obama will rubberstamp anything they want to do.

"Without sounding too alarmist, I’m frightened by that possibility," Crow says. "If the environmentalists have their way, they will try to regulate us and tax us out of business."

There is one thing — a big thing — that could delay the government’s environmental agenda: The economy is in the tank and has shown little sign of recovery. Obama’s plate is full of financial foes tied to the nasty recession. Unemployment continues to rise and experts say the housing market will continue to decline at least through 2010.

James says the economic turmoil will have a "dramatic effect" on Obama’s environmental agenda. First, it trumps almost any other issue. Second, much of his environmental agenda has a hefty price tag associated with it, and the money won’t be available to fund certain programs.

"The serious issue of the economy will take some of the focus away from the more radical opportunities that are there right now," James says.

Still, that doesn’t mean that all environmental initiatives could be delayed. James points out that Rep. Waxman recently replaced fellow Democrat John Dingell of Michigan from his post as chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. Waxman, who James calls an environmental activist, is now responsible for legislative oversight related to consumer protection, food and drug safety, air quality, energy supply and other matters.

"Waxman has called for costly and dramatic environmental laws that could be adverse to our industry," James says. "This is a signal that the Obama administration may try to move forward in its environmental agenda, even though there may be a high price tag. So I’m concerned we’ll see an effort to move a lot of this environmental legislation, even in the face of a down economy."

Hence, Crow says it’s vital for industry members to educate their government leaders that they are more about preserving the environment than harming it.

"We need a greater grassroots effort," Crow says. "We need to write our Congress people. Not enough of us do that."

Joe Cunningham, director of marketing for mower manufacturer Jacobsen, says the golf industry needs to promote itself as a sustainable entity in the environment, especially when it comes to global warming, a topic that Obama has vowed to address.

"Green spaces are definitely in favor in most communities," Cunningham says. "Green spaces provide benefit to people."

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