

## **RECYCLING GRASS CLIPPINGS - A MEDIA EFFORT**

**Roger McCoy  
WKBD-TV, Detroit, MI**

Who would ever guess that the lawn mowing chores I performed as a kid growing up in Kansas would prepare me for one of the most interesting environmental experiments of my television career.

WKBD called it "Mower Wars." It was a 20-week experiment last spring, summer and fall that put mulching and bagging mowers in a head-to-head test.

The battleground was my fairly ample lawn in Beverly Hills, Michigan and WKBD-TV's building lawn in Southfield, Michigan.

Simply put, WKBD wanted to show viewers how the mulcher stacked up against the bagger.

With the technical assistance of Michigan State University Professor Joe Vargas, Lawn Equipment Corporation, Snapper and Toro lawnmowers; and with the sweat of yours truly and WKBD maintenance staff Joel Howard and Rich Schulte, we began the experiment last April.

Using a pair of two-stroke Snapper lawnmowers; one a mulcher, one a bagger and a pair of two-stroke Toro lawnmowers; one mulcher, one bagger we compared elapsed time, fuel consumption, operating costs and how many pounds of grass clippings we sent to the landfill each week.

Each month through September we updated WKBD viewers during the 10:00 news on our "Earthwork" segment and told them how the experiment was progressing accompanied with interviews from yard experts and my neighbor Rich Haitaian, a die hard fan of bagging mowers.

Our motivation was, and is, the on-going use of municipal landfills for yard waste disposal: conservatively, 22% of the landfill space in Michigan is taken up by yard waste.

The vast majority of this yard waste could remain on the lawn with a benefit to the homeowner and to the homeowners property and at the same time stop filling up Michigan landfills with organic material that was useless in landfills and costs taxpayer dollars to have hauled away and disposed of in a costly and inefficient manner.

There are dozens of variables to consider when putting together a comparison of this type. Again, we measured time, fuel consumption, grass clipping poundage and costs to operate the lawnmowers.

Each week we mowed half of the test yard with the mulching mower, the other half with the bagging mower, and kept track of their individual performances.

The following week we alternated the arrangement with the bagging mower mowing the yard area mowed by the mulcher the week before and vice-versa. By splitting the lawn between bagger and mulcher each week, we hoped to take into account weather related variables such as moisture content in the grass, and any humidity or temperature effects on the lawnmower or its operators.

For example, after a particularly wet week in May, the bagging mower collected 196 pounds of grass clippings from my front lawn in Beverly Hills. During a dry week in April the same bagging mower collected just 38 pounds of grass clippings from my front lawn.

Here are some of the results from the experiment on my lawn: The bagging mower took about 25% more time to mow the lawn and used 15% more fuel than the mulching mower. On a minute-by-minute comparison, the mulcher used more fuel than the bagger because its blade cuts the grass several more times with more resistance and fuel consumption than the bagging mower.

If we could extrapolate bagger data to estimate how many pounds of grass clippings we would have sent to the landfill from my yard, we would have collected 2600 pounds of grass over the 20 week test period last year.

Add to that the cost of putting that grass in biodegradable trash bags at 40 pounds a bag, we figured we would have shipped 65 trash bags to the landfill.

Finally when we added the cost of biodegradable trash bags (at 30 cents) and fuel consumption, every time we spent a dollar operating the bagging lawn mower, we spent 36 cents operating the mulching lawn mower.

This year WKBD plans to expand the program by working with the South Oakland County Resource Recovery Authority and Michigan State University and set-up 11 test lawns to demonstrate yard waste recycling techniques.

Our goal is zero yard waste and like thousands of viewers we discovered that keeping yard waste on the yard makes sense both environmentally and in the pocketbook.