

Turf Related Injuries

GRIEVANCE CLAIMS FOR ALL MANNER OF HARM BECOMING WIDESPREAD

All logic would seem to indicate that there should be no need to discuss the topic “turf related injuries.” How have we gotten ourselves into a situation where we feel it is necessary to defend the use and enjoyment of a commodity that:

- stabilizes the land and helps prevent soil erosion and loss
- improves moisture infiltration into the soil, thus enriching groundwater supplies
- intercepts a wide variety of atmospheric pollutants and other wastes carried in surface water and within a microbiologically active root zone, and works to neutralize and detoxify these substances
- reduces the concentration of pollen that relieves allergy related discomfort of many people through control of seed head production by mowing
- utilizes carbon dioxide, thus helping to clean the atmosphere
- releases oxygen to help create a more healthy environment
- cools out-of-doors residential and recreational environments during the heat of summer
- makes the ideal play surface for a wide variety of sports and recreational activities.

This commodity, of such immense landscape and recreational value, also generates an agri-business impact of close to \$30 billion per year. And, public appreciation of lawns and sports turf is still on the increase.

It would seem that our only concern for turf related injury should be focused on insufficiently large areas of fine turf and on poor construction and maintenance practices that result in weak, thin turf and lawn grasses that cannot meet the expectations just outlined. These are of continuing concern, particularly as they relate to sports turf. Injuries to participants of contact sports increase on artificial or synthetic turf and on natural fields that are more mud than grass. Conditions that result in uncontrolled footing and provide insufficient smooth cushion are hazardous for all athletes.



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But, in recent years, an unexpected attitudinal change has occurred within our society. We are placing increased emphasis on filing grievance claims for all manner of harm—actual or alleged. These include personal injury from use of equipment on lawns and from application of materials such as fertilizers and pesticides. In addition, user injury claims related to groundwater pollution and malpractice by lawn applicators that is thought to cause injury to plants or animals in the vicinity of lawn treatment are on the increase. Lawsuits are becoming a popular means of bringing about settlements either in or out of court. Liability insurance rates are on the increase as expensive settlements, generous awards by juries, and far reaching court decisions have made the liability insurance business very risky. To stem multibillion dollar losses, companies are cancelling thousands of commercial liability policies or hiking premiums in mind-boggling increments.

In most landscape horticultural ventures, increases in insurance costs are not likely to be met through increased price of products and services. Expendable income may well cease to be used for lawns as costs continue to rise. Government regulations on product safety and on small business operations are also costly and

have the potential for elevating prices of goods and services above levels considered reasonable by the gardening public.

From the foregoing, it would seem that the equipment and chemicals used in lawn care must be extremely hazardous. This is not the case—as evidenced by both public and private research. However, two important limitations in this area are worthy of recognition. First, proper and safe use of all equipment and chemicals is essential. It is most difficult to protect people who cannot read or who simply do not read instructions from injuring themselves and/or others. Those involved in Cooperative Extension and consulting can attest to all measure of horror stories fundamentally grounded in mistakes made because of failure to read and understand directions on safe and effective product use. Second, we must recognize the great diversity in physiological chemistry among all plants and animals. The fact that a very high percentage of a population may not have adverse effects from a small amount of a particular pesticide does not mean that there could not be a highly sensitive individual out there who could be seriously injured by it. This biological variation and uncertainty dictates that by in large in low population areas, the chances of encountering hypersensitivity are less than in high population urban areas. Crowding of people increases the likelihood of creating irritants in the environment that are hazardous to someone's health.

Thus, in a relatively few instances, turf related injuries may be real and this is regrettable for those so inconvenienced. This inconvenience is not different from that recognized by others who experience sensitivities to varying aspects of our physical and psychic well being. It's part of a world never intended to be ideal for all people but eminently well suited for most. Lawns and gardens help make this a better place to live than could ever be had without them. ♦

—Lawn Institute Special Topic Sheets,
Better Lawn and Turf Institute, 1991