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## Taking Care of Athletic Fields is a Growing Business Turf Management Industry Booms as Golf Courses & Youth Sports Facilities Keep Expanding

Appeared in the New Jersey section of the Star-Ledger,  
Monday, June 13, 2005

by Stefanie Cohen, Star-Ledger Staff

There's more to maintaining an athletic field than cutting the grass.

These days, people in charge of making sure the grass is green and clipped to perfection must understand plant pathology and soil chemistry. They must be trained in pesticides, turf varieties and fertilization. And it helps to know how to drive a John Deere tractor.

As golf courses and fields for youth sports continue to sprout across the state, the business of "turf management" practices has been growing like, well, a weed.

"There is major growth in this area," said Bruce Clarke, director of Rutgers University's Center for Turfgrass Science. "Every school system, every town, has athletic fields. It's becoming much more of a science than it has been."

And it is providing jobs.

Nearly 58,000 people work in turf management in New Jersey, Clarke said.

"We have seven or eight job openings per student each year," said Craig Tolley, a landscape and horticulture professor at the County College of Morris. Tolley said he has a three-inch binder on his desk full of job listings.

New Jersey spends \$2.6 billion a year on athletic field and golf course development and maintenance, commercial landscaping and sod and seed manufacturing, Clarke said. Golf courses spend \$540 million alone.

These figures come from an economic impact study of the "green industry" by Rutgers University. The study will be released this fall.

In the mid-1980s, the state had 219 golf courses. Now there are 293, a 34 percent increase, said Michelle Rickard, executive director of the New Jersey Turfgrass Association in Milltown.

Youth sports is another big factor.

Jim Hermann, CSFM of the Sports Field Managers Association in New Jersey, which was established six years ago as an educational clearinghouse

for the burgeoning turf management industry, said children don't play the way they once did. Stickball doesn't cut it anymore. Now they play organized sports year-round, giving athletic fields a workout.

Athletes' expectations have grown as well, Clarke said. People want to play on lush fields and courses like those they see on television. Then there is the liability factor. Towns don't want to be sued when someone twists an ankle on an uneven patch of grass, he said.

The growth of the industry is reflected in new college offerings tailored to meet the demand.

For example, this fall, the County College of Morris will start a degree program for Turf and Turfgrass Management. Ocean County College plans to teach its first turf management course next spring. Mercer County Community College, Brookdale Community College and Bergen Community College already offer the subject, among other schools in the state. About 40 high schools and vocational schools offer turf management classes as well, said Nancy Trivette of the state Department of Agriculture.

Rutgers University has a comprehensive turfgrass science program that prepares students for jobs throughout the green industry. In the past 20 years, the Rutgers program has added six faculty members to train a growing student body.

"It's more than cutting grass," said Brad Park, Rutgers' sports field management specialist.

Those wishing to enter the field, he said, need to be properly educated. With a degree, students can start their careers at a higher pay scale. Entry-level salaries range from \$25,000 to \$40,000, according to the Rutgers study.

Earlier this month, the Sports Field Managers Association sponsored a District I meeting for the industry at Sussex County Technical School in Sparta. Sports Field Managers from schools, townships, and recreational

facilities throughout Northwestern New Jersey came to see demonstrations of new machinery and hear lectures on topics like "Fertilizer Spreader Calibration."

Participants also watched some Sussex Tech students, who are studying turf management, convert a softball field from grass to clay. The students expertly circled the infield on a Rotadiron, or reverse tiller, which pulls soil to the top of the field and buries rocks and grass at the bottom.

Jim Welch, a 16-year-old freshman, took a break from work and leaned against his shovel. Wearing a John Deere hat and blue jeans streaked with soft red dirt, he contemplated the thought of attending the new turfgrass program at County College of Morris.

"I didn't think I would ever go to college before, but maybe now," he said. "Maybe." ♦

### Did You Know?

*Raising mowing height 1/4 to a 1/2 inch during the summer will help to maintain turf quality. ♦*

## Calendar of Events

### Wednesday, July 27, 2005 District III Meeting

Lakewood Blueclaws baseball field tour and complimentary game sponsored by Wilfred MacDonald. District III members are invited at no cost. Watch for invitations in the mail. Questions? call 908-730-7770

### Wednesday, August 3, 2005 - Rutgers Lawn, Landscape and Sports Turf Field Day

See research plots, equipment demonstrations and trade show. Rutgers Adelphia Research Farm, Adelphia, NJ For more info contact 732-932-9375, ext 338 Or visit [www.njturfgrass.org](http://www.njturfgrass.org) or [www.sfmanj.org](http://www.sfmanj.org)

### September 9 & 10, NJLCA Brush up on topics for the Certified Landscape Technician

September 14 - CLT test written only at County College of Morris, Randolph

October 1 - CLT test at CC of Morris, Randolph

For more information, call the NJLCA office at (201) 703-3600 fax (201) 703-3776

### September 19-22, 2005 NCA Training Course, "Retrofitting for Accessibility" Gatlinburg, Tennessee

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