Weather smarts
for turf/landscape pros

If you're still relying on your local "weatherman" for advice on planning your day's turf or landscape chores, it's time you read this.

by Ron Hall / SENIOR EDITOR

Paul Zwaska looked out his small office window onto the playing field of Orioles Park at Camden Yard and concluded that he had to delay the start of the day's game with the visiting Milwaukee Brewers.

The Baltimore grounds manager didn't base his decision on the clouds he saw building over the stands. He based it on the moving satellite images he was receiving over the PC in his office. The PC's monitor showed an irregularly shaped patch of green indicating a weather front, containing smaller patches of yellow and orange, rain, approaching the ball park from the northwest.

Behind the front Zwaska saw no activity on the monitor, meaning clear skies. And behind that, some more green blotches approached. He concluded (accurately, it turned out) that the Orioles and Brewers, after the initial 20 minute drizzle delay, would have about three hours to play that afternoon's game before the next rain arrived.

When the mid-day drizzle stopped, the O's grounds crew whisked the tarps from the manicured infield and the game unfolded. At its conclusion, the rains returned, just as Zwaska predicted.

Zwaska received this accurate weather information from a software package, Weather for Windows, available only from Weather Services International (WSI), Billerica, MA. It requires a 386SX or greater personal computer with Microsoft Windows 3.1 or higher, and a modem.

Not all turf/landscape managers need such an exact picture of the weather. But, since it's easy and affordable to get, why not? Up-to-hour radar images and, depending on the service, 15-minute updates are literally available to anyone thanks to today's radar and satellite technology. Weather information can be accessed through desktop monitors, either a personal computer or one supplied by a contracted forecasting service.

Turf/landscape business owners and managers can use this knowledge to schedule work crews (construction, mowing, snow plowing) and chemical applications. It helps them irrigate efficiently too. In fact, it's difficult to think of any turf or landscape task that's not dependent upon the weather.

"In our business, weather is a huge factor. It can make you or break you," acknowledges Robin Milliken, H&R Landscape & Lawn Care, Overland Park, KS. "You can't change it, so you have to work with it."

Late in 1995 Milliken's company contracted with Omaha, Neb.-based Data Transmission Network Corporation for a DTN Turf Manager weather system. "We can pull up current conditions; city-by-city temperatures, overnight lows, predicted highs, surface winds, the possibility of precipitation. The information is updated every 15 minutes," says Milliken.
Instant uplinks

Here’s how the DTN service works:
The company’s weather center receives
weather information from numerous
sources, including the National Weather
Service. The data is instantly uplinked to a
satellite for reception to a subscriber’s satel-
life antenna and into his/her color monitor.

Robin Milliken, “You can’t change the
weather, so you have to work with it.”

Nineteen regional radar maps indicate
county-level precipitation. Image maps are
updated every 15 minutes. Users lease the
antenna and monitor from DTN which de-
scribes the monitor as an “easy-to-read elec-
tronic magazine.” It’s not a PC, like Zwaska
uses in at Baltimore’s Camden Yard.

Gary Wilder, Director of Golf Mainte-
nance at Calloway Gardens Resort in Pine
Mountain, GA, has been using the DTN
system for several years and describes it as
one of the most valuable tools he uses.

“The first thing I do when I arrive here
in the morning is look at it, and it’s the last
think I look at when I leave,” says Wilder.
“I have six superintendents who work with
me here, and in an eight-hour-day, we
probably use it all eight hours.”

Wilder says the weather forecasts pro-
vided by the system allow his managers to
more efficiently schedule their labor needs
along with more obvious benefits such as
the application of chemicals, fertilizer and
irrigation.

“We’ve had cases where we would
come in expecting to spray fungicides on
the greens, and with over 300,000 square
feet of greens that quite an expense. The
local weather forecaster here might say
there’s only a 20 percent change of rain,
but when we look on the radar and see the
rain is almost here, we hold up and don’t
spray,” says Wilder. “We’ve literally saved
thousands of dollars.”

Significant savings also come from more
precise scheduling of work on the resort’s
63-hole complex. If Wilder can look at the
DTN images and determine that rain, say,
will last all afternoon, he can let the work-
ers go home. “It can save us as $250 an
hour on a normal hourly rate,” he says.

David Mellor, assistant director of
grounds at Milwaukee County Stadium,
has been using the system since last April.
“When we got it I wasn’t sure how helpful
it would be and I was worried that it
would be so technical that you would al-
mast have to be a meteorologist to use it.
But you don’t,” he says.

Grounds Manager Gary Vanderberg
will often ask umpires to view the images
during game rain delays. “To be able to see
the weather like that really lets you know
what’s going on,” says Mellor.

For more information about Weather Ser-
vice International’s Weather for Windows
software package contact John Bosse, WSI,
508/670-5000. For information about DTN
Turf Manager contact Jay Ferguson,
800/610-0777.

Navigate the ‘Web’ for weather data

Weather information is available on
the Internet.

In fact, turf/landscape managers can
call up local and regional forecasts, includ-
ing long-range forecasts, with just a few
keystrokes on their PCs, assuming they
have access to the Internet.

All kinds of information can be found
at cirrus.sprl.umich.edu/wxnet, a site devel-
oped by the University of Michigan.

If you don’t want to wade through this
much information, call up www.intelli-
cast.com/ right away. Intercast is a regis-
tered trade mark of Weather Services In-
ternational (WSI) which provides the radar
and Nexrad (Next Generation Doppler
Radar) images over the Internet.

Need a one-hour update of the Nexrad
image for your region? Find out the three
letter code of the nearest large city near
you and keystroke the following address,
calling up Cleveland, for example:
www.intellicast.com/weather/cle/nexradl.
Or, the Detroit site:
www.intellicast.com/weather/dtw/nexradl.

For a larger radar view of your region
use the same address with appropriate 3-
letter city codes, but replace the final word
“nexrad” with the word “radar”.

If you don’t know the three-letter code
of your city, you can access the radar and
Nexrad images you want by entering cir-
rus.sprl.umich.edu/wxnet/rdatsat.html. This
should give you a map of the U.S. showing
every major city. Click on the icon of the
city you want, and wade through several
icons to retrieve the weather information
you need. Depending on the speed of
your PC and your Internet access provider,
it shouldn’t take you more than couple of
minutes.

Be advised, this weather information is
not “real time.” It is, at best one hour old.

If you can add to this information for
the benefit of other turf/landscape man-
gers, please contact Ron Hall, Landscape
Management magazine, 216/891-2636.
Fax: 216/891-2683. E-mail: lscape@en.com