

Speaking with a **single voice**

Groups representing different segments of the Green Industry are joining forces to get the attention of water policy makers. **BY JOHN WALSH**



United as one. Sending a message.
Loud and clear.

These phrases describe what's happening in states when various segments of the Green Industry form under umbrella organizations to educate legislators about the industry's impact on the economy and its need for irrigation water. These umbrella organizations — such as the Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association (FNGLA); Green Industries of Colorado; and the Georgia Urban Ag Council (UAC) — let legislators know how restrictions and laws about issues such as water affect the industry. They're also influencing legislation in their respective states with the goal of protecting their industries.

Strength in numbers

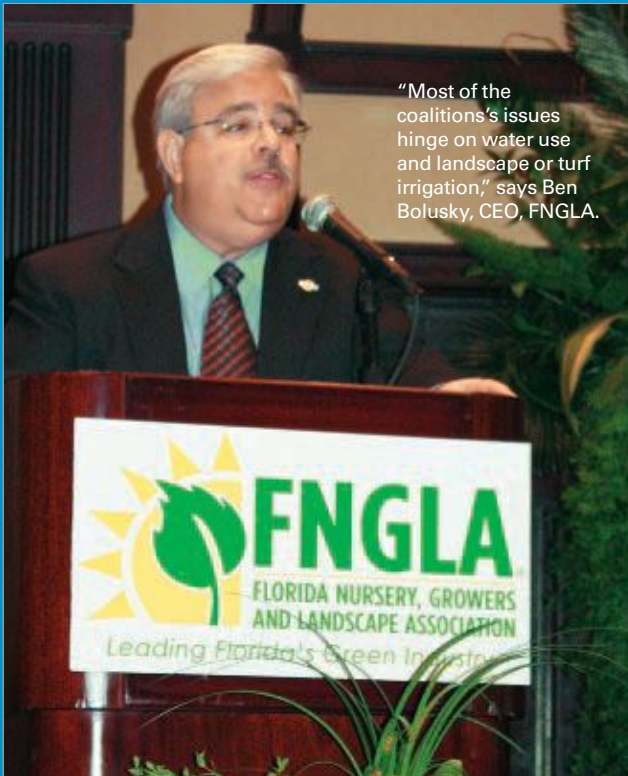
The FNGLA chairs an informal group called the Florida Green Industry Coalition whose members collaborate on legislation that affects the Green Industry. The coalition produces position papers about various public policy issues, bringing together the voices of different Green Industry groups.

"There's strength in numbers," says Ben Bolusky, CEO of the FNGLA. "Most of the coalition's issues hinge on water use and landscape or turf irrigation. Droughts have led to the proliferation of rules and regulations. In Florida, it's either feast or famine with water because of our rainy

and dry seasons. But it's not an issue of water shortage; it's really an issue of water storage. We're bringing the Green Industry and Blue (Water) Industry together in Florida."

Government regulations and environmental activists have spurred Florida's Green Industry to develop a stronger voice in the legislative arena. Because of term limits in Florida, the days of relying on a lone sheriff to guard the town or good ol' boys to push a particular industry issue are long gone. Florida is becoming more urban and suburban, and the nursery/landscape industry is right in the middle of the unfolding transformation.

"Where would Florida be as a world-class tourist destination if it weren't for the plants and services from our industry? We need to be working together," says Bolusky.



"Most of the coalitions's issues hinge on water use and landscape or turf irrigation," says Ben Bolusky, CEO, FNGLA.

County and municipal ordinances regulating fertilizer use have been increasing. This means more fertilizer restrictions, which ignored science, were spreading. This spring, Florida's legislature passed a fertilizer bill (SB 494) for which the FNGLA led the charge. The bill affects growers, retailers and landscapers, among others.

Additionally, legislators signed a "Florida friendly landscaping" bill into law this spring. It'll be used as a benchmark for environmental friendliness, Bolusky says.

The new law codifies the bedrock principle of horticulture science: Put the right plant in the right place. Florida-friendly landscaping offers broad opportunities for the use of turf, native plants and plants bred for the state's several unique climates.

The FNGLA also challenged the South Florida Water Management District about the number of days one can irrigate lawns during restriction periods. At press time, the issue has yet to be resolved.

Additionally, the FNGLA is working on behalf of the Green Industry relating to land issues. Because Florida is becoming more urbanized, it's important to recognize where the concentration of nurseries are — especially during times when the governments are looking for new ways to fill their coffers, Bolusky says.

In a state with no income tax, everything is taxed unless the legislature exempts it, so there are sales tax exemptions for the Green Industry all over Florida.

"We want to ensure the tax treatment of ag lands is protected," Bolusky says. "We need to protect the tax status

of nurseries, which are concentrated in urban areas."

The FNGLA wants to promote the landscape and nursery industries as an integral part of the green infrastructure, and wants them to be on the receiving end of construction projects and government buildings.

"We're ultimately helping improve the bottom lines of Green Industry businesses," Bolusky says. "Our mission is to enhance members' business success, and our vision is to be a leader that speaks to the overall industry."

Remaining vigilant

Prior to the present formation of the Georgia Urban Ag Council, its four association partners — Metro Atlanta Landscape and Turf Association (MALTA), Georgia Turfgrass Association, Georgia Sod Producers Association and Coastal Landscape and Turf Professionals Association — thought they could work with legislators about the issues affecting their businesses on their own. But that only confused legislators. The groups soon realized forming a coalition based on common issues would be more effective.

"We work well together and identify common issues — labor, immigration, water and pesticide use — affecting the Green Industry," says Mary Kay Woodworth, president of the Georgia UAC and executive director of MALTA.

The first big issue the UAC dealt with was immigration in 2005.

"Georgia has become one of the toughest states when it comes to illegal immigration," Woodworth says. "We have zealous legislators who are frustrated with the federal government's lack of enforcement, and laws have been proposed and passed that are potentially damaging to industries that rely on immigrant labor. We need to make sure businesses that are doing the right thing aren't penalized."

So far, she adds, "in many cases, we've been able to reason with legislators."

But during the past two years, and until recently, it was all about drought and water restrictions.

"The drought issue was a nightmare," Woodworth says. "The state's total ban on outdoor water use in September 2007 was devastating. No business could operate, and consumer confidence was completely eroded. From June 2007 to December 2007, the Green Industry lost \$3 billion in business."

Before a Level 4 drought was reached, the UAC made sure members knew the state's restrictions. However, local governments were allowed to implement additional restrictions, which caused problems because counties and cities enacted their own restrictions at will. For example, a contractor working in six different counties could potentially have to abide by six different sets of water restrictions. Adding to this confusion was contradiction with state laws regarding soil erosion protection — disturbed land was

required to be revegetated, for example, but with outdoor water use restricted, it was impossible to comply.

In February 2008, Georgia House Bill 1281 was proposed. The bill, as passed, says water providers won't be allowed to change state water restrictions unless it petitions the Georgia Environmental Protection Division first. Now, consumers won't be subjected to the hodgepodge of water restrictions.

"It was looked as though we were stepping on the toes of local legislators because they thought they knew best," Woodworth says. "But we helped water providers by allowing them to sell water and landscape contractors by allowing them to use water more appropriately. We had to protect the industry. Something had to be done."

The drought was declared over in June 2009, although even at press time there are still non-drought rules in place. Drought-rule revisions will start this winter. Woodworth says the industry has been assured that in the revision, care will be taken so that no one group will be penalized and everyone will suffer equally during a drought in which state water use restrictions are implemented.

"We need a balance with the environment; we just can't shut the water off," says Jim McCutcheon, CEO of HighGrove Partners, a landscape contractor part of the Georgia UAC. "Water still is a huge issue for us. That overrides anything."

Still, the UAC is dealing with people who want to ban outdoor water use. It needs data and economic information to rebuff them.

"We're beginning to effectively work with other stakeholder groups — water providers, local government, environmental groups," Woodworth says. "That wasn't so 10 years ago. We can't reach a consensus with every group on every issue, but it's good for the industry as a whole."

"Across our region, our industry must build and sustain legislative/regulatory relationships that give us a seat at the table and a respected voice about issues like the need to increase water storage capacity, which is a regional issue that will impact all of the Southeast," she adds.

This year will be a big year legislatively in the state because groups are trying to restrict water use.

"Water woes can't be solved by conservation ... efficiency is important, but additional inventory is a must. We need to remain vigilant," she says.

Green Industries of Colorado (GreenCo), an alliance of eight trade associations representing diverse aspects of

the plant and landscape industry, originally was intended to take care of big-ticket, Green-Industry-related items via lobbying. A few years ago, it hired a lobbying firm, Hicks & Associates, to keep an eye on bills and keep the Green Industry's voice heard.

Quantifying industry's impact

But it also wanted to quantify the Green Industry's impact on the state as a whole. It spurred the first impact study and several thereafter, which were conducted by Colorado State University and funded by trade associations and businesses in the Green Industry. In 2007, the study determined the Green Industry in Colorado was a \$3.3-billion-a-year industry (calculating all factors) that employed 40,000 people.

Like the UAC, water is the biggest issue for GreenCo. In 2002-2003, there was a major drought. Precipitation totaled as little as 4.5 in. for the year, and snow pack was as little as 25% of normal in some river mountain river basins.

"It was determined 50% of residential water usage is for outdoor watering, so municipalities said, 'We'll step in.' That's when GreenCo got loud," says Eric Moroski, president of GreenCo and VP and co-owner of Colorado Springs-based Weisburg Landscape Maintenance. "We all needed to speak with one voice to keep the targets off our back."

GreenCo hired a water consultant in 2004 as a subcontractor, who became GreenCo's face in water issues.

Water quality is becoming bigger issue than water quantity, Moroski says, because all water runs downhill, and erosion affects water quality.

The No. 2 issue for GreenCo recently has been about soil. Before the recent HB 1092 Utility Locates

Bill passed, contractors and homeowners were supposed to notify the Utility Notification Center of Colorado if they were planning to move as little as a teaspoon of soil.

"The bill was poorly designed," Moroski says. "In that case, all lawn aeration would need to be notified."

The new bill, which passed last fall and went into effect Aug. 1, states no notification is needed for routine maintenance for any mechanical digging down 4 in. and hand digging down 12 in.

"This new bill had a very positive impact on us," Moroski says. **LM**



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SAVE A HORSE, KILL A **FIRE ANT**

Nick Aslani decided to specialize in treating horse farms because of the demand for fire ant treatments at such accounts.



WHEN NADER “NICK” Aslani emigrated to the U.S. from Iran in 1978 — just six months before the Islamic revolution — little did the 16-year-old high school student realize that his interest in plant science would lead him toward a career as a highly sought after fire ant control expert in northern Florida.

The lessons Aslani learned while spending time on his maternal grandfather’s farms in Iran have served him well. After graduating from a Miami high school, earning an agronomy

degree from the University of Florida in 1985, and working his way up to service manager for Orkin, Aslani founded Marion Pest Control in 1991.

“I had certain ideas in my mind about how a business should be run,” he says. “I wanted to concentrate on customer satisfaction.”

Slow, controlled growth has enabled Aslani to employ his wife, Sarita, and son Alex in the family business.

In its first several years of existence, Marion Pest Control’s primary market was residential service — treating for ants, termites and general household pests in the north-central Florida cit-

Fire ants meet their match in North Florida horse country

BY **LEE BLOOMCAMP**

SAVE A HORSE

ies of Ocala and Gainesville. (Ocala is located in Marion County, hence the name of the business). However, in 2000, Aslani made a calculated decision to take on a new breed of client: horse farms.

The Ocala area is considered to be one of the premier locales for thoroughbred horse breeding and training farms in the world. More than 200 facilities are located in Marion County. Aside from the equine residents and the people who love and live near them, the farms also host a far less-welcome guest: the red imported fire ant (*Solenopsis invicta*).

Fire ants present a huge liability issue for horse farms because the aggressive invertebrates can injure or even kill newborn foals, and cause general health problems for valuable adult horses. The venom released in a sting from a fire ant causes a painful pustule and can lead to secondary infections. Contrary to popular belief, fire ants don't just bite their victims; they use their mandibles to grasp their victims' flesh while using a stinger on their abdomens to inject venom.

Even more troublesome is the fact that, instead of a single ant sting, fire ants typically swarm their prey before they actually attack — which results in hundreds of painful, debilitating stings. Fire ants are efficient predators and will attack humans, ground-nesting birds and animals, and any other insects, including harmless native ant species, in their territory.

Black and reddish brown in color, fire ants typically nest in the ground, topped by low, 2- to 3-ft.-wide, pyramid-shaped mounds that can have multiple entrances and extend several feet into the soil. Depending on the size of the colonies, there can be as many as 150 mounds per acre. On a property the size of a typical horse farm, this means fire ant populations can get out of control quickly if preventive and curative steps aren't taken regularly to rid the property of the pests.

Ground vibrations can trigger defensive attacks from fire ants. On a horse farm, normal feeding and move-

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TOP 5 TIPS FOR RED IMPORTED FIRE ANT CONTROL

1 Make sure you are dealing with fire ants. Pocket gophers, harvester ants and other critters can make piles of soil similar to those made by fire ant colonies. Disturbing the mound with a stick or a quick kick will bring fire ants to the surface if they're present.

2 Make a long-term commitment to fire ant control. In many areas, the only way to keep properties free from fire ants is a year-round control program. Without regular treatments, fire ant populations will rebound quickly from the arrival of new, winged queens; invasion from adjacent property; and introduction of fire ants in sod and landscape materials.

3 Consider an integrated pest management (IPM) program. An integrated program includes spot applications to existing colonies and broadcast baits. Mound treatments with contact insecticides are effective in small areas, but it's easy to miss small colonies or do an incomplete treatment when you're working with large areas. Baits are easy to apply and eliminate the possibility of overlooking small or hidden colonies. When starting a control program on a new property that's heavily infested with fire ants, use bait first, then follow up in one or two weeks with insecticide treatments to active mounds to provide a short-term reduction in populations.

4 Be careful when storing and applying fire ant bait. Fire ants are discriminating feeders. Always keep fire ant bait away from other pesticides and fertilizers. Use a spreader that's dedicated to bait application only. Dust left in the spreader from fertilizer or granular pesticides can contaminate bait and be detected by fire ants, causing rejection.

5 Consider using biological controls. Biological control agents, such as phorid flies, have been established in some areas and are helping to reduce fire ant populations. The flies are parasites of red imported fire ants and have been effective in reducing populations in areas where they've been introduced.

To learn more about red imported fire ants, visit:

- > http://entomology.ifas.ufl.edu/creatures/urban/ants/red_imported_fire_ant.htm
- > <http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/animals/rifa.shtml>
- > <http://fireant.tamu.edu>

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From left, Nick, Alex and Sarita Aslani make fire ant control a family affair.

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ment by the horses can disturb the ants.

Fire ants are a particular problem because they sting the foals, which are sensitive to the venom. The horses cost a lot of money, so protecting them is a priority, Aslani says.

When Aslani made changes in his business model to cater to horse farms, he found plenty of work. Currently, of Marion Pest Control's 300 customers, about 90 percent are horse farms. The other 10 percent of his accounts are those who remain from when he first started his business.

Although Aslani hasn't actively pursued the residential market in almost 10 years, many horse farm owners are former residential customers, so he still treats their properties as a matter of convenience and in the name of good customer relations.

Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, one of the largest equine veterinary practices in the world, has been a customer of Marion Pest Control for more than 10 years.

"Fire ants are an issue when you're dealing with horses in fields, such as we

do on a daily basis," says Paul Vrotsos, chief executive officer of Peterson & Smith. "The foals and staff attendants particularly are susceptible to bites. For a young horse, the blisters and sores caused by the bites can be traumatic."

Because of the size of most horse farms, Aslani and his son use two ATVs, mounted with spreaders, to make broadcast applications of Award insect growth regulator (IGR). For Aslani, this is an effective method of delivering the product because fire ants forage as far as 100 feet from their mounds.

Aslani has used the insecticide as fire ant bait exclusively since 1994 to treat for residential properties and horse farm customers. As one of the few products labeled for use on horse farms, Award normally takes two to three months to completely destroy fire ant populations.

"I saw results after five weeks," Aslani says.

Because fire ants don't possess the ability to swallow solid food, they take the bait granules (which have been soaked with oil that carries the active ingredient fenoxycarb) back to the

mound, where it's pulverized by the ants. The ants ingest the active ingredient-laced oil and regurgitate it to larvae, the queen and other workers in the mound. The bait product eventually destroys the fire ant population because, as the queen ingests the IGR, it inhibits her ability to produce healthy eggs and the multitudes of worker ants needed to carry out the daily activities that are vital to the colony.

As with most ant species, fire ants maintain a strict social order. At the top of a fire ant society sits the queen. Her primary job is to produce the thousands of eggs needed to maintain the colony population. Fire ant queens mate with short-lived winged males during their nuptial flight. After insemination, the queen is fertile for the rest of her life, which can be as long as eight years.

A mature queen fire ant can eventually lay as many as 1,200 eggs per day. When establishing a colony and the first eggs hatch, the initial group of workers emerges from the mound and immediately forages for food for the

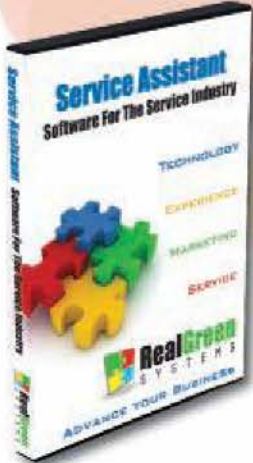
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queen and larvae. After just six months, the fire ant colony can grow to several thousand workers and feature a mound that can be identified easily in a field. Colonies of this size can contain more than 200,000 large, medium and small workers — all infertile females.

The primary job of the younger and stronger worker ants is to care for immature ants and the queen. As these workers age (they have about a two-month life span), they move to different roles in the colony and are tasked with building and repairing the mound. In the days and weeks before they die, the workers are sent to the outside world to search for food because it's the riskiest activity for worker ants.

Fire ants aren't picky eaters and are attracted to such things as dead animals, worms and other insects, as well as any living animals that can't escape their

attacks. Because of their broad-ranging foraging behavior, a broadcast baiting program such as the one Marion Pest Control uses on the horse farms is effective.

Aslani is realistic when it comes to controlling fire ant populations on his customers' properties.

"We automatically broadcast Award every six months," he says. "After each application, I go back to the property to see if they're taking the bait, but a fire ant swarm may eventually reinfest an area. That's why we need to keep on top of it."

Though his client roster has changed dramatically in the 18 years since founding his business, Aslani has always made customer satisfaction a top priority.

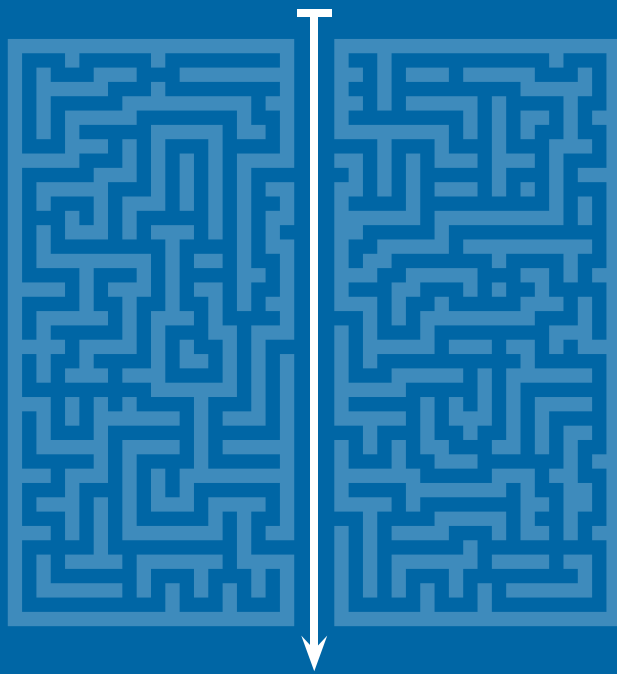


"I've deliberately kept my business small to ensure good contact with customers," he says. "We emphasize customer satisfaction and treat everybody the same, regardless of size. I have a love and passion for the industry, and believe that when you promise a customer something, follow through. In fact, do better than you promised." **LM**

BLOOMCAMP is a territory manager for Syngenta Professional Products.

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