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## THE HALLMARK

RON HALL EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Ron has been in the Green Industry for 26 years. Contact him via e-mail at [rhall@questex.com](mailto:rhall@questex.com).

# A matter of integrity and trust

**J**ust over 20 years ago, a colleague wrote a short article alerting readers to unflattering data for a product being promoted as the next great chemical turfgrass grub control. Grubs are every lawn's worst nightmare.

My friend hardly expected the backlash resulting from his article that he based on a summary of the research of a well-respected Midwest entomologist. Appearing in an issue of *Lawn Care Industry* magazine, a sister publication to *Landscape Management* at the time, the piece related how the scientist's field-testing showed that the insecticide was being captured by turfgrass thatch and degrading before making it into the soil where, of course, grubs do their dirty work.

The article ignited an angry reaction from an executive with the chemical company. He demanded further explanation from the scientist and a public mea culpa from the editor. The executive insisted his company's research showed that the molecule provided excellent grub control. (Yes, in the laboratory, the molecule probably tested very well indeed.)

Money and reputations were at stake. His company had already started a sizable marketing campaign for the product.

The researcher stuck to his data, and the magazine wouldn't budge either. Both had much to lose — for the researcher, future research funding from the company; for the magazine, advertising revenue.

Not surprisingly, the product, with further testing confirming its unsuitability as a grub control, was allowed to fade away. The executive eventually cooled down, and sometime later in the 1990s his company was absorbed by a larger agrichemical company during a period of furious industry consolidation.

So, what's the point of rehashing this ancient history? The turfgrass industry (indeed, the public) rightfully relies upon a surprisingly small group of experienced and, yes, honest researchers — many

of them working at our major universities — tasked with testing and evaluating the products being developed for the use by professional applicators. In my 26 years covering the industry I'm not aware of a single instance of any of them falsifying data for any company's benefit. There's too much at stake — not the least of which is their reputations.

These researchers tell us what works, why it works and how best to use the modern chemical tools that science provides.

Beyond that, the environmental and human safety protocols established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Environment Canada, which have been regularly reviewed and updated these past 40 years, are among the strictest in the world.

While I'm not expert on the processes our regulatory people follow to make sure the products we use on our properties pose no undue risks to our health, our children's health or the environment, I'm confident they're well-thought-out and result in reasonable decisions.

Has this system always worked perfectly? Of course not. The agrichemical business, and especially that portion of it focusing on developing lawn and garden chemicals and also of regulating their use, is barely a half century old.

Even so, the system — from the university level through the halls of our regulatory agencies and with ongoing refinements — has worked remarkably well. And it continues to work. It's not broken.

That said, some lawmakers in our Canadian provinces and in our state capitals, attracted by what they sense as a populist issue, continue to bend to the emotional rhetoric of groups seeking to ban or restrict the use of products that, I believe, have been rigorously but reasonably tested. These critics unapologetically disparage the opinions (in some instances, integrity) of scientists and regulators most knowledgeable about these products. On what grounds it's not clear.



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# CAN **GAS** REMAIN **KING?**

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Commercial cutters are warming to the **COST SAVINGS** and environmental benefits offered by **ALTERNATIVE FUELS**



BY **RON HALL** EDITOR-AT-LARGE

**T**all and outgoing, Eric Hansen's youthful enthusiasm keeps him investigating better ways to serve his landscape clients.

While his tightly run, 30-person Competitive Lawn Services is best known in the Chicago suburb of Downers Grove for providing reliable service the past 28 years, the past three years he's been moving it in a "greener" direction. He uses propane-powered mowers and handheld equipment, which he is field testing. His service trucks, including a propane-fueled Roush Ford F-350, proclaim "Green Propane Power."

He sees four benefits to propane versus gasoline: 1.) propane mowers emit a smaller amount of harmful exhaust emissions, 2.) it burns cleaner and with less carbon and he saves money with fewer oil changes and reduced maintenance costs, 3.) his units are quieter, and 4.) it's less expensive. Usually.

"Landscape companies should be looking for green initiatives that they can adopt. Using propane is something that we can do," says Hansen.

Propane (also known as LP gas or LPG)

is one of several alternative fuels now being used in mowers. Others include biodiesel, compressed natural gas (CNG) and ethanol.

Their use within the industry is growing, but it's not clear by how much.

The Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), whose members include most mower and engine manufacturers, doesn't track the shipment of mowers manufactured or converted to use these fuels. It does track annual mower shipments as a whole, and more than 90% of the 131,798 new 2010 commercial units are powered by either gasoline or petroleum diesel, the vast majority by gasoline.

"The air-cooled gasoline products for the professional mowing industry represent good technology. The life of the engines match fairly well the rest of the components on the products," says Mark Pavcik, product line manager for John Deere's professional mowing equipment. "Contractors get good value during the life of their machines, and they're good at keeping records, so they're always moving up or trading out their machines."

Pavcik wouldn't get an argument from the >>>



## COVER STORY

thousands of commercial cutters who have built their businesses on gas and diesel-powered units.

Hansen admits he's ahead of the curve in his choice of fuel, but he's pretty sure he's on the right track.

"Commercial properties and larger corporations are demanding green from the top down and some are requesting that alternative fuels be used on their facilities," he says.

Boosting development of these new fuel choices for mowers and other maintenance equipment are the U.S. EPA and the California Air Resources Board (CARB), which are pushing lawn and garden engine manufacturers to reduce exhaust and evaporative emissions.

### Cost savings

But the biggest attraction, at least for end users, is probably cost. While labor is the biggest *continued on page 18*

## ALTERNATIVE FUELS AT A GLANCE

» **Biodiesel** is a domestic, renewable fuel for diesel engines derived from natural oils like soybean oil. Biodiesel can be used with petroleum-based diesel fuel in existing diesel engines with little or no modification. Biodiesel is not the same thing as raw vegetable oil.

» **Compressed natural gas (CNG)** is made by compressing natural gas to less than 1% of the volume it occupies at standard atmospheric pressure. It's stored and distributed in hard containers at a pressure of 2,900 to 3,600 psi. CNG is used in traditional gasoline engines. CNG produces significantly fewer emissions of pollutants like carbon dioxide, hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulfur oxides and particulate matter, as compared to gasoline.

» **Ethanol fuel (ethyl alcohol)**, the same type of alcohol found in alcoholic beverages, is often used as a biofuel additive for gasoline. Most ethanol in the U.S. is produced from corn. Ethanol contains approximately 34% less energy per unit volume than gasoline.

Alternative fuels are considered "greener."



» **Propane (LP gas or LPG)** is normally a gas, but compressible to a transportable liquid. It is derived from other petroleum products during oil or natural gas processing.

A mixture of propane and butane, used mainly as vehicle fuel, is commonly known as liquefied petroleum gas (LPG or LP gas). An odorant is added so that people can easily smell the gas in case of a leak. About 90% of U.S. propane is domestically produced, most of it in Texas.

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*continued from page 16*

expense of delivering service, the cost of fuel and equipment are significant, fuel being the most unpredictable. By not making every gallon of fuel work as efficiently as possible, owners forfeit dollars out the exhaust of their mowers. This is true regardless of energy source. The memory of \$4.50 a gallon gasoline

and hated fuel surcharges three seasons ago lingers in owners' minds.

And, yes, alternative fuels offer the possibility of measurable savings.

For example, as this article was being prepared in mid-summer, Ferrell Gas in northern Ohio quoted a price of \$1.88 per gallon of propane for, say, a one-person mowing operation. Because of

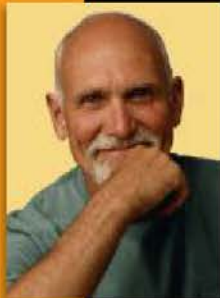
the modest amount of propane purchased, the company charges for pickup and delivery of the 33.5-lb. cylinders. However, a landscape operation using, for example, 200 gallons of fuel a week could expect to pay \$1.63 per gallon. This includes free, twice-weekly pickup and delivery by the supplier. Compare this to \$2.79 per gallon of gasoline in the same region.

Be advised, however, propane prices can be volatile because supply is affected more dramatically by weather and production issues than either gasoline or diesel. Even so, because propane is used for winter home heating, the price falls about the time that spring mowing season begins. About 90% of the propane used in the U.S. is produced

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1. Failing to keep mower blades sharp, tune mowers or change filters at proper intervals.

2. Cutting in extremely hot conditions.

3. Mowing the same areas of a property twice (overlapping).

4. Operating a mower when it is not cutting grass (e.g. turning, going from one jobsite to another, etc.)

5. Failing to clean accumulated grass from under a rotary deck.

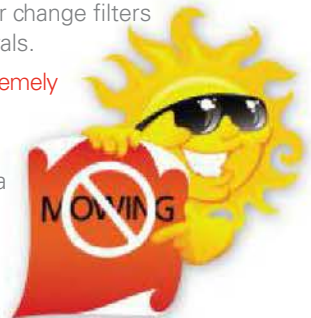
6. Inefficient or unskilled operator.

7. Cutting under loads or cutting wet or very high grass, can reduce fuel efficiency by more than 30%.

8. Mulching decks use more fuel than decks that discharge grass.

9. Mowers with hydrostatic drive use more fuel than belt-driven units.

10. Using bigger mowers than warranted on properties. Heavier mowers typically use more fuel than lighter-weight units.







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## COVER STORY



Biodiesel figures larger into the fuel mix for diesel mowers.

*continued from page 18*

domestically — 75% of that in Texas from natural gas and crude oil refining.

“It’s amazing how far LP gas has progressed since 2005 as far as availability,” says Warren Evans of Dixie Chopper, the Coatesville, IN-manufacturer that started selling propane-powered

mowers in 2006.

Evans, in a spring roundtable sponsored by the Propane Education & Research Council, listed these advantages of propane versus gasoline:

- › less carbon in the fuel
- › fewer oil changes
- › less engine wear

- › better fuel stability
- › no chance of fuel contamination
- › no fuel spillage
- › less chance of fuel theft
- › easy to store

Evans says that Dixie Chopper has been running propane-powered vehicles for three decades.

“When I got my drivers license in 1981 the first vehicle I learned how to drive was a shop truck powered by propane,” he says.

At least 10 manufacturers now offer mowers with engines that operate on propane. And there’s a growing market for conversions from gasoline to propane power, as well.

### Getting started

For his part, Chicagoland’s Hansen is taking it one step at a time. In 2008, after finding out as much as he could about alternative fuels, he ordered two

*continued on page 22*

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