



Laying down roots in Washington

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In gaining an invite to the ground breaking of the national GrassRoots exhibit recently, I was left in a quandary as to whether or not I could fit the trip into a week where many annual meetings were taking place.

I did manage to take a look at the guest list however and my mind was quickly made up for me – this was an invite I couldn't turn down. Thanks to the MAGCS as they offered to support the initiative and teamed with the CDGA to put the wheels in motion on my visit. So with trepidation and interest at the machinations of Washington I set off to see how the politics of promoting turf is working for us on the ground.

In a short background – the turfgrass industry is somewhat fighting a long term battle to retain its place as a premier surface for recreation in the country and deal with the perception that the industry is environmentally unfriendly. As professionals and scientists we all know that the benefits of turf far outweigh the inputs when managed properly. Research reports have shown that turf sequesters carbon, filters water and stabilizes soil erosion¹²³ – the issue is that the information has NEVER been supported at a Federal Level. Recent research has also shown that there were no chronic health risks to

pesticide vapors for golfers on the course either⁴. Thus when the USDA agreed to allow a space for education and research on site under the prodding and pushing of Scott Aker at the National Arboretum along with Kevin Morris of the National Turfgrass Federation for a four year period, many people rejoiced at the thought of having an exhibit seen by 500,000 people annually educating them about grasses.

The event was focused on the ground breaking and promotion of the exhibit which includes one main location focused on science at the National Arboretum and two other sites. The two other sites are at the National Mall and Arlington National Cemetery with focus on stewardship and service respectively. The overarching goal is to link the three sites to create a National Greenscape Corridor which runs right through the center of Washington. Thus the excitement about the project was evident with the range of attendees making up a very impressive list.



The Grass Roots Initiative: A Science-Based Focus on Turfgrass

Turfgrass has a major impact on our quality of life. The U.S. National Arboretum's [Grass Roots Initiative](#) is a four-year, in-depth look at the science behind this familiar, but often misunderstood, landscape plant.

The event was seated and introductions made by Scott Aker who served as MC for the event. Kevin Morris described the project from its infancy and how the National Turfgrass Federation had been directly involved. (Picture 1) Dr. Colien Heffernan then talked about the aims of the project and the reasoning from her perspective as director of the national arboretum as to why grass is valuable. Dr. Heffernan also mentioned Scott Warnke who is the USDA turfgrass breeder and his focus on more sustainable type grasses. In the list of grasses in the exhibit there is certainly some new species which may offer potential with names such as *Festuca gautieri* 'Pie Carlit' bear skin fescue, *Sesleria autumnalis* Autumn moor grass, *Muhlenbergia capillaris* 'White Cloud' White cloud muhlygrass being uncommon names that really are offering potential for low input turfgrasses. Geoffrey Rinehart the project coordinator then gave an outline of his involvement with all interested entities and how he has been able to channel donations of time, money and work to the right places.

The Goals of Grass Roots

Increase awareness of the importance of turfgrass and lawns to society and the environment

- Demonstrate new technologies within the turfgrass industry that improve maintenance practices and efficiencies
- Review and update national research priorities for turfgrass
- Bring together policymakers and others interested in regulatory issues that impact the turfgrass industry

Following this, Dr. Frank Rossi from Cornell University spoke on the sustainability of turf. Dr. Rossi did not shy away from controversy surrounding turf and the perception that implicates turf negatively with the environment. He then proffered a belief that turf was indeed sustainable as well as badly needed in the landscape due to the scientifically proven benefits. There was one caveat however as he indicated that we may need to change the requirement of green all over the golf course to reduce inputs. Water use and what needs to be done to reduce its use was also brought up and the fact that more education of homeowners may prove to be a bigger priority over looking at golf courses. He also touched on the project and the fact its based in science as all information that will be used has gone through peer review at the Crop Science Societies prior to dissemination. Questions from the public followed with Dr. Rossi ably answering them and ensuring that all sides were agreed on the answer he gave as being factual and correct.




The ground breaking and pictures followed with the USDA, National Arboretum, National Mall, National Turfgrass Federation, Sod Producers all being pictured. Dr. Mike Kenna, USGA Greens Section Director then got in on the act along with Greg Lyman, Environmental Programs Director at the GCSAA and many others who have already supported the project. The project is currently over 60% funded and there are many opportunities to get involved at different levels – if you want to find out more information visit the website.

<http://www.turfresearch.org/>

There is also a facebook page: NTFGrassRootsInitiative and Twitter: @Grass_Roots_NTF

Finally, MAGCS were very strong supporters of the visit and I would like to thank the board for being so flexible and supportive of the idea.

Reference:

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4. Wong, H. and D.A. Haith. (2013). Volatilization of Pesticides from Golf Courses in the United States: Mass Fluxes and Inhalation Health Risks. *Journal of Env. Quality* 42: 1615–1622