

# Up With the EPA

How one superintendent embraced the agency's strict standards to strengthen his course's environmental image

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR



**P**at Blum, superintendent at Colonial Acres Golf Course in Glenmont, N.Y., took a phone call from his friends at Audubon International, who told him they had someone they'd like him to meet. When

they told him the person was an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) representative — and that they wanted to meet him at the course in a half hour — Blum's heart fluttered for a moment.

But Blum, whose tireless work on behalf of protecting the environment has been recognized by the New York Department of Environmental Protection and the GCSAA over the past three years, quickly recovered his composure. Sure, he told them, bring the EPA representative down.

"In general, the EPA thinks of golf courses as toxic waste dumps, as do many members of the nongolfing public," Blum says. "I wanted to show people *that* perception was all wrong."

After that chance meeting last July with Tristan Gillespie, pollution prevention coordinator in the EPA's New York office who was at Colonial Acres to explore the course's Audubon initiative, Blum embarked on an effort to enroll his course in the EPA's Performance Track program, an agency program that recognizes businesses that go above and beyond their environmental requirements.

Gillespie was so impressed with Colonial Acres that he suggested Blum apply. The superintendent knew it wouldn't be easy, since Colonial Acres was the first golf course ever to try for the designation. But Blum, who never

Pat Blum uses algae-eating fish instead of chemicals in his course's ponds.





shies away from trying to improve the course's image, jumped at the chance to make his golf course even more environmentally sound.

Thanks to the efforts of Blum and its members, Colonial Acres earned the Performance Track designation in May, becoming the first — and so far the only — golf course to do it. Blum encourages other superintendents to consider joining him.

"There are some great environmentalists in this industry, and we should highlight them at every opportunity," Blum says. "Working with the EPA gives us another chance to do it."

### What is the Performance Track?

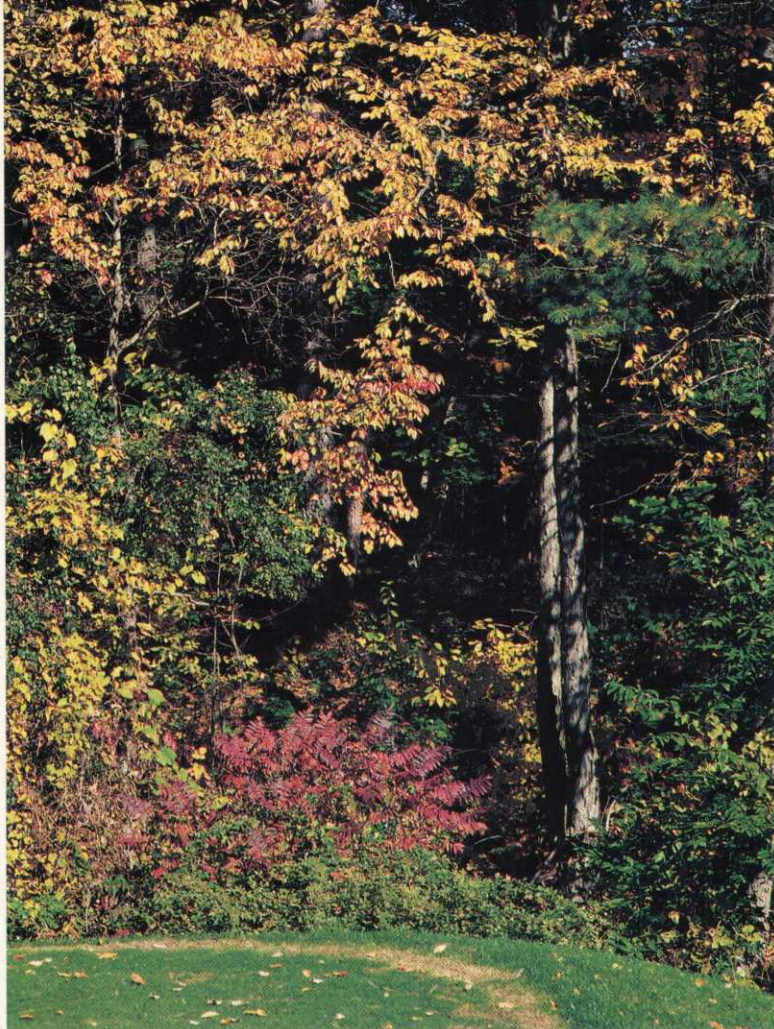
Before applying for the Performance Track program, Blum did his research to figure out what the program was all about.

The EPA launched its Performance Track program in 2000. It currently has more than 300 business members nationwide, but the agency had never targeted golf courses for enrollment. After hearing about Audubon International's Cooperative Sanctuary and Signature Sanctuary environmental programs, specifically Colonial Acres, the EPA contacted the organization to see how its work could dovetail into a Performance Track outreach program for golf courses.

To be involved in the Performance Track, businesses must meet the four following criteria:

- They must have a strong record of cooperating with state and federal regulations.
- They must also have a documentary history of environmental achievement (which is where Audubon's program gives superintendents a head start) and commit to two (or four) future achievements from a host of categories, including air improvements, water improvements and controlling pollutant discharges, among others.
- They must have an environmental management system in place, identifying each of the effects they have on the environment and demonstrating that they have methods of measuring them.
- They need to make their efforts public, whether that's in talking to the media, local community or being involved with the EPA in ongoing publicity projects.

The EPA liked the documentary side of what Audubon International did and used its programs as templates for other golf course projects.



"We wanted to measure some different items and cover some issues in a little more depth, so we had to modify what [Audubon] had already done," Gillespie says. "But we liked its basic programs, and I used it on another project I was working on."

### What it takes

Blum started his quest to join the Performance Track last November. Although he's a member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, which superintendents often criticize for burdening them with too much paperwork, the amount of Performance Track paperwork staggered him — befitting the governmental program it is.

The EPA demanded hard numbers about practices like gasoline and water use per year, and how many pollutants each piece of equipment emitted (measured in pounds per year). Then it wanted him to feed all the information into a preset formula to benchmark his course so the EPA could measure progress. Blum set some hard and fast environmental goals to reach within four years. He stopped and restarted the application three times be-

**Colonial Acres keeps diverse layers of trees, shrubs and understory plants on its borders to create a good wildlife habitat.**

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cause of the amount of information the EPA wanted.

"This was a whole new level," Blum says. "These were things we'd never documented before, even under Audubon's program, but the EPA wanted more — so we did it."

It wasn't all paperwork, however. Blum also got the opportunity to do what he enjoys most — educating the non-golfing public about the role superintendents play in protecting the environment. He explained to the EPA some of the proactive steps superintendents use to be good environmental stewards, like spot treating pests and the growing practice of turning more maintained turf back to nature.

Blum educated them about how careful superintendents are when they make chemical applications to avoid unintended environmental consequences. He says the EPA officials he spoke to



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PAT BLUM  
COLONIAL ACRES GOLF COURSE  
GLENMONT, N.Y.

seemed surprised and pleased by superintendents' environmental awareness.

"They'd never heard of some of those practices before," Blum says. "Some of the EPA people we talked to were golfers, but many were not. We had to teach them the building blocks of golf course maintenance. They were willing to learn about what we do. I found that encouraging."

Blum finally submitted his completed application in January, and the EPA

approved it the following month. Colonial Acres received its Performance Track certificate at a meeting for the program's newest members.

"I'm not going to pretend it wasn't a lot of work, but there's a payoff in getting our message out," Blum says. "I would encourage the rest of my colleagues to consider getting involved with the program for that reason alone."

Joellen Zeh, program manager for Audubon's Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses, concurs.

"I'd like to see other environmental leaders in golf get involved in the program," Zeh says. "The positive publicity it would generate would be invaluable."

### Rewards good behavior

In return for adhering to EPA's strict performance standards, members of the Performance Track earn some flexibility when it comes to EPA regulations, says Marcia Seidner, an EPA's regional Performance Track director who oversees New York, New Jersey and other territories. That doesn't mean they're exempt from the regulations, but it does mean they might get slight deadline extensions that nonmembers wouldn't get, have permits expedited or environmental impact decisions made ahead of others. Members are also inspected less frequently than other facilities.

"Since the EPA doesn't regulate golf courses directly, those perks don't apply as easily to them," Seidner says. "We'd love for superintendents to let us know what

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incentives they could use so we can tailor a better program that would encourage golf courses to get involved."

Zeh says adding the EPA's visibility to a course's résumé makes its commitment to environmentally sound practices easier to understand for more golfers.

"It's not a replacement for the educational value and personal attention of the Audubon's programs, but it's certainly complementary to what we're doing," Zeh says. "It's a mutually beneficial relationship for both of us — and golf courses win with both programs."

For Blum, it allowed him to continue his advocacy for the golf course industry on a larger stage — and get some publicity for his executive course in the bargain. Blum now sits on the EPA Advisory Council for the program and has made it his mission to convince the EPA there are good environmental practices in the golf course maintenance industry. But Blum has a much more personal reason for advocating environmentally sound golf course maintenance.

"It goes beyond what we do for our environment now — we need to worry about our children's environmental future, too," says Blum, who has two chil-

**Blum has installed nesting boxes around the course to attract bluebirds and tree swallows to nest on the course.**

dren, Samantha, 8, and Zach, 3. "If we can get more golf courses involved in these kinds of programs, we can lead the way for others to join us."

Count Gillespie among those Blum convinced that superintendents can be excellent stewards of the environment. In fact, Gillespie says golf courses have made it easier for him to sell the voluntary environmental protection through pollution prevention to other businesses.

"Having the golf courses on board makes it easier to convince other industries to join us," Gillespie says. "Golf courses are often some of the most visible members of a community."

Gillespie also credits Blum for opening his eyes — and the eyes of others — to the possibilities of getting golf courses involved on good terms with the EPA.

"Pat's energy is contagious, and it's really exciting to see the work he's done with his course," Gillespie says. "The more I get involved in the industry, the more I realize there are more people like Pat out there — and that's a great story for the industry to tell." ■