

# Off The Fringe



## In The Line of Fire

### SAN DIEGO AREA SUPERINTENDENTS BEGIN REBUILDING AFTER WILDFIRES SUBSIDE

By David Frabotta, Senior Editor

**I**t's simultaneously one of the most awesome and frightening phenomenon on Earth. But Dave Buckles refused to get out of its path.

Buckles had no idea what his day would entail when he left for work on Monday morning, Oct. 22, to go to his job as superintendent of Rancho Bernardo Golf Resort and Spa near San Diego. Southern California wildfires raged, but Buckles figured his resort was out of harm's way.

About 500,000 acres burned from Los Angeles to south of San Diego for almost two weeks in late October. The wildfires, totaling 23 at one point, forced about 1 million people from their homes. More than 2,000 homes and commercial structures were damaged.

Almost 500 homes were lost in Rancho Bernardo, including one on the golf course of the Rancho Bernardo Golf Resort and Spa. But it could have been worse if it wasn't for Buckles, assistant superintendent Esteban Chavez and six others from his crew. They helped beat back flames from neighboring homes with garden hoses and hustle. They are credited with saving at least six homes from destruction, and Buckles could have saved many more by creating an impromptu firebreak by quickly clearing an access road that had filled with brush.

Eventually, firefighters came through to relieve Buckles and his crew. But across

**Wildfires leveled Pala Mesa's maintenance building. Distributors chipped in to get it mowing again.**

town, there would be no rescue for parts of the Pala Mesa Golf Course and Resort.

Superintendent Mark Louder expected to see only wreckage when he arrived at work Oct. 23. The resort was evacuated the day before, and the news had reported that the resort was leveled.

"At that point I began to wonder if I still had a job," Louder said.

But when Louder arrived at the property, he realized news reports had been exaggerated. Most of the course was unscathed.

"The only buildings that

**Santa Ana winds pushed wildfire across I-15 and through the Pala Mesa Resort. Luckily, the only turf damage was around the perimeter, but plenty of trees perished.**

were lost were, of course, my maintenance facility with all my equipment and the human resources/accounting building," he said.

All of the resort's equipment burned in the inferno, including his central control system for irrigation. He had just overseeded wall to wall, so he was in a bit of a pickle. Luckily, Toro overnighted him a new system, and Turf Star created an irrigation program for him.

In addition, Turf Star, Golf Ventures West and AA Equipment offered loaner equipment to get him mowing again.

Damage from the 23 fires is expected to exceed \$2 billion. Thousands of people in the San Diego area have begun rebuilding their homes and lives.

And some will send thank-you cards to the Rancho Bernardo golf course maintenance crew. ■



## Off The Fringe

# Jake Pledges Six Sigma

**BUSINESS STRATEGY HELPS  
COMPANY WITH QUALITY CONTROL**

By Larry Aylward, Editor in Chief

**J**acobsen President Dan Wilkinson used a quote from Arnold Palmer to kick off a talk he gave to business magazine editors at the company's Charlotte, N.C., headquarters in October.

"The condition of the golf course is the battlefield upon which golf facilities will win or lose in today's ultra-competitive environment," Wilkinson quoted The King as saying.

Wilkinson is well aware that the golf course market is undergoing a stock market-like correction of sorts after overbuilding in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The net growth of 18-hole golf course openings in the United States in 2006 was minus 26.5.

"From our perspective, this isn't a good thing," Wilkinson said. "If we want to grow, we have to deliver a product that provides better performance to the customer."

That's why Wilkinson takes Palmer's

quote to heart ... and head. He knows he can't afford not to react to the market's situation. So Wilkinson decided to introduce Six Sigma, a modern management strategy, to the company's operations.

Six Sigma has gained popularity in the business world for its quality of control mechanisms. It may be gaining ground as a popular approach in the golf industry. Six Sigma is a set of practices originally developed by Motorola in 1986 to systematically improve processes by eliminating defects. Six Sigma stresses that manufacturing and business processes can be measured, analyzed, improved and controlled. Six Sigma at many organizations simply means a measure of quality that strives for near perfection.

When Wilkinson came to Jacobsen in 2005, he spent considerable time with other members of the senior leadership team discussing what the manufacturer of mowers, aerators and other golf course equipment needed to improve on to better serve its customers. They decided Six Sigma would play a role in that process.

At Jacobsen, Wilkinson says Six Sigma meets head on with customer

service. "It's a very defined process that gets us to what ultimately is a result that's customer driven," he says. "What we've done is [implement] our Six Sigma methodology into our product development process so we can really deliver the performance our customers are expecting."

Six Sigma plays a few different roles at Jacobsen, Wilkinson says. "One is the focus on lean — of taking cost and variation out of the manufacturing process," he says. "Another is what we call DMAIC, which is an acronym for Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve and Control. That's about taking a look at the existing process you have ... improving it and putting a control plan in place."

Six Sigma is also playing a role in Jacobsen's product development testing. In fact, Six Sigma has brought back an intensive approach to product development testing that has been missing from the company for several years, Wilkinson says, noting that company personnel realized that a mower produced in the southeast United States might not operate the same on turfgrass in southeast Europe.

"It used to be that we could design something and test it here in Charlotte or around the Southeast and then we'd send it out," Wilkinson says. "Now we're doing a lot more robust testing. ... We've begun testing our products around the globe. We're testing them on courses in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America."

It's no secret Jacobsen had some customer service issues before Wilkinson arrived, specifically with problems refilling part orders with its dealers. Basically, things were getting lost in the shuffle.

Six Sigma has also impacted this segment of Jacobsen's operations. John Whittington, Jacobsen's distribution center manager, provided a tour of the center and talked about the improvements ►



Jacobsen's John Whittington talks about the improvements the company has made with its parts refilling

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# Business Tip of the Month

## Quotable

**"I can always tell when the Chase is about to start because of that awful feeling I get in the pit of my stomach. But playing golf definitely relaxed me. It really improved my state of mind."**

— *NASCAR driver Jimmie Johnson to Sports Illustrated on how he's learned to chill away from the race-track. (The "Chase" is the several races that combine the Nextel Cup series or the Chase for the Cup. Johnson won the Cup in November for the fourth straight year.)*

**"It would be unwise and illegitimate to say that we've achieved environmental success as an industry. A practical approach is to assess where you are and strive to get better every day."**

— *Greg Lyman, Director of Environmental Programs for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.*

Jacobsen has made in its parts refilling operation, which focus on efficiency and safety, among other things. That said, Wilkinson admits Jacobsen is still fighting a negative perception from superintendents on the parts-refilling front.

"It's a battle I fight every day," he said. "I take it very personal." ■

## Proactive About Pesticides

Superintendents can help themselves by educating the public

**G**olf course superintendents should expect public scrutiny to increase in coming years in regard to their use of pesticides on golf courses. Even though superintendents use pesticides responsibly, the current environment might require them to address questions concerning pesticide usage.

In fact, superintendents can help themselves and the industry they represent by being proactive and educating the public about how they use pesticides sensibly. The public needs to understand that many superintendents are formally educated, have many years of field experience with pesticide use, and understand the importance of using pesticides at the proper rates and not over using in order to maintain the reliability of the chemical.

Local superintendents could join together to make a formal presentation on golf course maintenance and how pesticides play a role in turf management at city council meetings. The Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) reports that there has been "a significant increase in localities attempting to 're-regulate' pesticides already thoroughly regulated by federal and state agencies." These localities should understand that golf course superintendents are professionals who want to maintain the integrity of their profession by being responsible to their employer, the course and their community.

Superintendents could also invite the local press — including newspaper and television reporters — to their respective golf courses to discuss the what, why, when and where of the maintenance staff's pesticide application program. Superintendents should make clear to the public that there's nothing to hide.

The bottom line: By stepping up and using their expertise, superintendents can educate the public and the press about the value of pesticides when used responsibly.

*The "Tip of the Month" is provided by Syngenta to support superintendents in their agronomic, business and professional development.*



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## Off The Fringe

# Investing in Tomorrow

BAYER, DEERE COURT THE NEXT GENERATION OF SUPERINTENDENTS

By David Frabotta, Senior Editor

Assistant superintendents think this school is cool. Almost twice as many of them visited Bayer Environmental Science's research facility in Clayton, N.C., this year for Green Start Academy, a continuing education and networking event, than attended the inaugural event held last year.

Education sessions for the event, held in October and geared specifically toward assistants, focused on golf course care and maintenance, professional development, industry regulations, turf science and recent research. Bayer and John Deere sponsored the event.

"Bayer and John Deere recognize the greater role assistants are playing in the day-to-day management of golf courses," said Michael Smith, assistant superintendent of Three Crowns Golf Club in Casper, Wyo. "The advances in science and technology require those of us in the turf business to constantly update our knowledge. A strong turf education goes a long way, but I have found that the experience gained in the work place, along with keeping up with the new products and techniques, is crucial in good management practices."

Irrigation was the topic for debut speaker Grady Miller, Ph.D., a professor at North Carolina State University. With the Southeast and Southwest now measuring droughts in decades, water seems to be on the mind of every golf course operator.

"We're experiencing one of the worst droughts that North Carolina has ever seen on record," Miller said.

Regarding water, Miller said growth rate, evapotranspiration rate, length of growing season, soil type, grass type, rain, intensity of cultural practices and available soil moisture all influence the amount of water needed on a golf course.



Assistant superintendents play Cornhole while waiting for an evening barbecue.

With water shortages now plaguing many parts of the country, effluent water use is becoming more common. But it's not always in the turf's best interest.

"You test soil all the time, but you had better test the water, too, because it has the ability to change the quality of your turf," Miller said.

USGA Green Section agronomist Dave Oatis, director of the Northeast Region, said water management provides an opportunity for burgeoning superintendents to differentiate themselves within the profession.

"Effective water management is always the key to long-term success," Oatis said. "There's a common thread among the best superintendents: They are the ones who spend the extra time and effort to properly manage water."

Attendees also heard and learned from: Dave Fearis, director of membership for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America; certified superintendent Bruce Williams, director of golf and grounds management at Los Angeles Country Club; certified superintendent Bob Farren, grounds and golf course manager at Pinehurst Resort; David Spak, biological development manager for Bayer Environmental Science; and Nick Hamon, director of development and technical services for Bayer Environmental Science. ■