



The Obama Order

Led by a liberal president, the Democrats now rule the roost in Washington. How will the party's dominance affect the golf course maintenance industry?

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

While campaigning for president, Barack Obama vowed to change America. Now that Obama has been elected president, the people who make up the golf course maintenance industry wonder how that change could impact what they do for a living.

Some people are alarmed at what Obama and the Democratic-led Congress could do to regulate the industry. In a recent *Golfdom* online survey that asked questions and opinions about the presidential election, one superintendent responded, "If Obama wins, we're in big trouble."

It's the first time since 1995 that the Democrats control the ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Considering the liberal tendencies of some of those Democrats, many people in the golf course maintenance industry expect there will be changes that will affect how they do their jobs, especially from an environmental standpoint. Those people include everyone from golf course superintendents and club professionals to course architects and builders, as well as the manufacturers who create the products and equipment used to maintain them.

These people wonder if the Democratic-laden government will more heavily regulate what they do. Will superintendents be required to use less fresh water to irrigate? Will superintendents and their crews come under greater scrutiny in regard to pesticide and fertilizer application? Will pesticide and fertilizer companies come under steeper analysis for the products they manufacture? Could certain pesticides used on golf courses be banned?

Says Mark Woodward, CEO of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, "It will be interesting to see how things shake out" in the next four years with the Democrats in charge.

Woodward says the GCSAA will speak out against any legislation it deems unfair. If the industry must defend any of its maintenance practices, Woodward says the association will present its defense based on "sound science and sound technology that protect the industry and protect our sustainability."

"The entire industry will have to be vigilant at addressing these issues as they arrive," Woodward says. "[These issues] are not [exclusive] to the GCSAA — they affect the entire golf industry. We all need to show the value that golf courses have for the environment and the communities where they are located."

Mark Esoda, certified superintendent for the Atlanta (Ga.) Country Club, expects there will be change. But what worries Esoda is that change will happen so quickly that the industry won't have a chance to react to it.

"My concern is with rapid escalation," Esoda says. "I'm afraid we won't be able to keep up with all of the regulations as they come down."

Neil Cleveland, director of the U.S. Green Business for Bayer Environmental Science, says he's paying close attention to what could happen on the pesticide front with a more liberal-minded government in place. "Anytime there's change, whether it's on the federal, state or local levels, it certainly requires some investigation and thought on our part as to what that change may or may not mean," Cleveland says.

Mike Suhre, head professional at Oak Brook Golf Club in Edwardsville, Ill., is concerned that increased environmental regulations will result in more expensive eco-friendly maintenance products to be used on golf courses, which could in turn drive up the cost of the game. Then play could decrease and rounds and revenue could drop, he says.

"Hopefully, Obama moves to the middle [to govern]," Suhre adds. "But with a left-wing Congress, golf may be in for a rough ride."

Allen James, president of RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment), says every president, despite his political affiliations, has moved somewhat to the middle to govern.

"Obama will be a little left of center, but further left than any president we've had in some time," predicts James, whose association represents manufacturers, formulators and distributors of specialty pesticide and fertilizer products. "He will be pressed

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by those leaders in Congress who are more radical than he is. And he's going to be pressed by all the environmental groups he has made promises to."

As president of DC Legislative & Regulatory Services, David Crow represents corporations and trade associations on issues related to chemicals and the green industry. Crow says Obama, whom he calls the U.S. Senate's most liberal member the past few years, will be less business-friendly than the previous administration because he and Congress will increase taxes and regulations on businesses, including the golf course maintenance industry.

And that's not all.

"We're going to face a lot more environmental activism," Crow says.

Crow cites the Clean Water Restoration Act, which was introduced by Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.) to "fix" the Clean Water Act. The Clean Water Restoration Act would give the government the authority to govern water bodies in public and private settings, including lakes, ponds and wetlands on golf courses. That means the Environmental Protection Agency could decide input amounts — from pesticides to fertilizers — on turf-grass located near water bodies, Crow says.

"This could mean a mandated reduction

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RISE's Allen James says Barack Obama "will be pressed" by environmental groups and others.

PHOTO BY: MARTY WHITFORD

Obama And the Economy

Many political pundits say Barack Obama won the election because voters thought he was more apt to fix the ailing economy. But don't include golf course superintendents in that bunch.

Last fall, *Golfdom* conducted an online election survey in which 74 percent of participants said the economy, more than any other issue, helped dictate their candidate of choice. But their candidate of choice was John McCain by a whopping 47 percent margin.

Citing Franklin D. Roosevelt as an example, Joe Cunningham, director of marketing for mower manufacturer Jacobsen, says Democrats have historically been elected as presidents during past difficult economic times.

"When people are fearful about national security, they tend to vote Republican; when they are fearful about the economy, they tend to vote Democratic," Cunningham says. "Can Obama handle the economy better [than a Republican?] That remains to be seen."

But it's safe to say that superintendents and other golf industry personnel would like to see Obama repair the economy — especially for the sake of their business.

"We need a strong economy to be successful," says Mark Woodward, CEO of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. "A lot of people need to have discretionary income to play golf."

However, the golf course industry might not be as bad off as other industries if you consider statistics from the National Golf Foundation. In December, the NGF reported that 38 percent of golf course operators expected revenue to be up in 2008, 25 percent expected it to be down, and 27 percent said it would be about the same. In other words, revenue was essentially flat in 2008.

However, new golf course construction continues a downward trend. U.S. golf course developers are on track to post the fewest openings in two decades, the NGF says. "The economic situation, particularly the continued decline in the housing market, has and will continue to suppress golf course development activity in the United States," said Joe Beditz, NGF president and CEO, in the report.

If golf course architect Craig Schreiner had Obama's ear for a few minutes, he'd tell him to build new golf courses as part of his economic stimulus plan. Schreiner believes a golf course can do a lot of good for a neighborhood, especially from a socio-economic standpoint. Schreiner, who's based in Myrtle Beach, S.C., has designed several nine-hole, par-3 courses for The First Tee, whose mission is to provide young people the chance to learn the game by playing on par-3 courses designated as First Tee facilities.

Schreiner says he designed a few of the courses in some run-down neighborhoods. When the courses were built, people who lived in houses on or near the courses took a newfound pride in their properties, Schreiner says. They cleaned up their yards and painted their houses. Not only that, the courses draw neighborhood kids, many of whom are the products of single-parent homes, off the streets and into their facilities to learn the game and its etiquette.

"Those courses have become community assets," Schreiner says.

— Larry Aylward, Editor in Chief

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in pesticides and fertilizers," Crow says. "This would turn the EPA into a water czar for all state, local and federal water bodies."

Crow says the Clean Water Restoration Act is likely to pass in the next Congress. "And Obama will sign it in a heartbeat," he adds. "If it becomes law, it can change our lives in terms of how we use our products."

Crow and Allen say that several members of Congress, including Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), are anti-pesticide and have an environmental agenda awaiting Obama when he takes office. The big question is whether Obama will rubberstamp anything they want to do.

"Without sounding too alarmist, I'm frightened by that possibility," Crow says. "If the environmentalists have their way, they will try to regulate us and tax us out of business."

There is one thing — a big thing — that could delay the government's environmental agenda: The economy is in the tank and has shown little sign of recovery. Obama's plate is full of financial foes tied to the nasty reces-

sion. Unemployment continues to rise and experts says the housing market will continue to decline at least through 2010.

James says the economic turmoil will have a "dramatic effect" on Obama's environmental agenda. First, it trumps almost any other issue. Second, much of his environmental agenda has a hefty price tag associated with it, and the money won't be available to fund certain programs.

"The serious issue of the economy will take some of the focus away from the more radical opportunities that are there right now," James says.

Still, that doesn't mean that all environmental initiatives could be delayed. James points out that Rep. Waxman recently replaced fellow Democrat John Dingell of Michigan from his post as chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. Waxman, who James calls an environmental activist, is now responsible for legislative oversight related to consumer protection, food and drug safety, air quality, energy supply and other matters.

"Waxman has called for costly and dramatic environmental laws that could be adverse to our industry," James says. "This is a signal that the Obama administration may try to move forward in its environmental agenda, even though there may be a high price tag. So I'm concerned we'll see an effort to move a lot of this environmental legislation, even in the face of a down economy."

Hence, Crow says it's vital for industry members to educate their government leaders that they are more about preserving the environment than harming it.

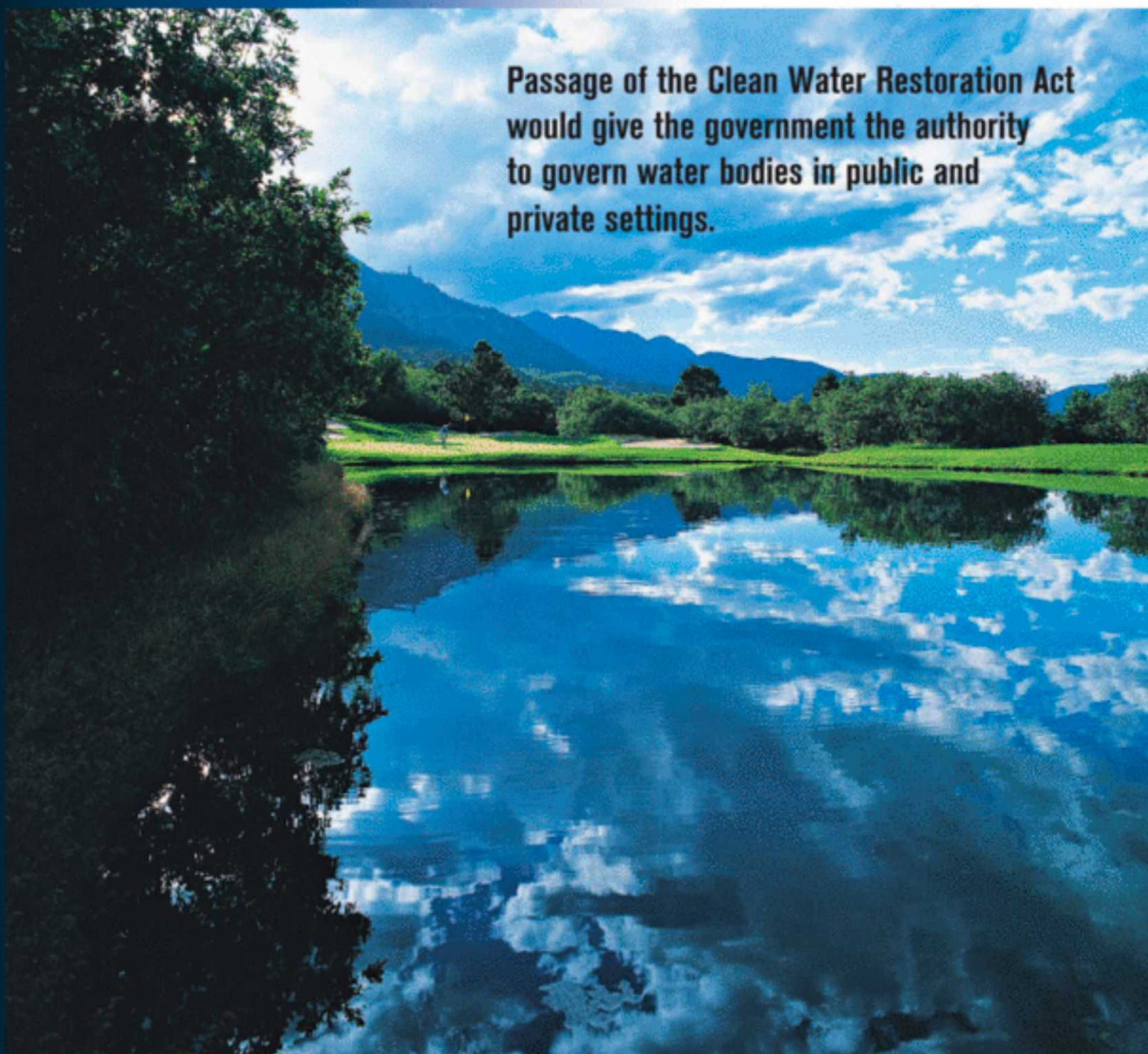
"We need a greater grassroots effort," Crow says. "We need to write our Congress people. Not enough of us do that."

Joe Cunningham, director of marketing for mower manufacturer Jacobsen, says the golf industry needs to promote itself as a sustainable entity in the environment, especially when it comes to global warming, a topic that Obama has vowed to address.

"Green spaces are definitely in favor in most communities," Cunningham says. "Green spaces provide benefit to people

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David Crow (above) believes several members of Congress, including Rep. Henry Waxman (below), are anti-pesticide and have an environmental agenda awaiting Obama when he takes office.

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concerned about global warming. We have to promote that.”

The GCSAA has been proactive in gathering information that tells a positive story about its environmental prowess, Woodward notes. In cooperation with the association’s environmental wing, the Environmental Institute for Golf, the GCSAA has conducted or is conducting profile projects on water, pesticide and energy use that Woodward says support the profession’s position as an environmental steward.

“We have a darn good story to tell,” Woodward says. “We just have to get better at telling it.”

Bayer’s Cleveland says a more liberal administration shouldn’t change the pesticide industry’s sense of urgency to promote its products as beneficial to the environment when used appropriately. However, Cleveland realizes there are politicians and environmentalists whose opinions about pesticides will be difficult to sway.

“How do we go from changing the perception that we’re just controlling pests to showing that we’re actually creating healthier green spaces that sequester carbon and mitigate runoff and pollutants?” Cleveland asks. “That’s really where this discussion needs to go.”

Pesticide manufacturers have spent millions on research to create new products with less-toxic active ingredients the past few years. One well-known researcher, David Shetlar of The Ohio State University, has remarked how insecticides are “getting safer and safer and safer.” But the question among pesticide manufacturers is whether lawmakers will ever notice their efforts.

James says most lawmakers don’t know the hurdles a company must clear to register a new pesticide with the EPA. “And they certainly don’t focus on what chemical companies are doing to make their products safer,” he adds.

But lawmakers will listen to environmental activists and their opinions about pesticides, James stresses. This is a major concern, especially if it results in what James calls “draconian legislation.”

In his Pin High column, Larry Aylward says the Republican-dominated golf course maintenance industry should, in the words of one golf course superintendent, “root for Obama’s success.” See page 8.

However, James says RISE would be part of a green industry coalition to oppose such legislation if introduced.

“We will work closely in harmony with all members of the industry, including superintendents, to bring as much impact at the federal level as we can,” James says. “We still have friends in Congress, and we will keep them informed of the safety of our products and how they’re used responsibly by superintendents so they will be willing to push back against this type of legislation.”

While Obama has his doubters in the industry, others believe he and Congress will act sensibly in his environmental approach. Michael D. Jones, certified superintendent of New Mexico Tech Golf Course in Socorro, N.M., says he’s a registered Republican but he believes Obama will “bring a well-thought-out and reasonable approach to his appointments to the Environmental Protection Agency and any environmental legislation.” (In December, Obama tapped New Jersey’s Lisa Jackson to head the EPA. She is the former head of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.)

“Many of us in the industry realize the need and will embrace reasonable regulations,” Jones adds.

Others expect environmental change, but believe the industry will adapt to it. Matt Shaffer, superintendent of Merion (Pa.) Golf Club, expects change to be “dramatic,” but he doesn’t believe superintendents will be caught off guard by it.

“[That’s because] superintendents are far better stewards of the environment than the American public realizes,” he says.

Shaffer voted for Sen. John McCain, but he’s not bitter that Obama was elected.

“He wasn’t my candidate of choice, but he’s my president, and I’m rooting for his success,” Shaffer says. ■