

MAKING THE GRADE

A state-approved program was developed by the Virginia highway department to train potential chemical applicators for the state tests.

by Jeff Sobul, assistant editor

Two years ago, the Virginia Department of Transportation decided it needed better trained chemical applicators to work along its roadways. The idea was to get safer chemical applications with a better public image.

Therefore, the highway department petitioned for and got approval to administer its own applicator training program. Criteria for the program, which involves training for the state department of agriculture core manual and spray certification tests in Category 6 (rights-of-way) and Category 3 (ornamentals and turf), are actually a bit more stringent than the state's.

"We had a keen interest in safety and preserving the right to use herbicides," says Boyd Cassell,

landscape coordinator for the state. "In the mid-'70s, we realized the sensitivity of using the pesticides on rights-of-ways to special interest groups, adjacent landowners and what have you. We had as much concern for the safety of our employees and water, too.

"So one of the first things we did was to make it our policy: one, we won't spray in front of someone's property if they don't want us to; and secondly, we think the secret to safe application and not getting bad publicity is to properly train personnel. In that regard, all of our applicators have to be certified as commercial applicators, meet regulations, and go beyond regulations."

As a result of the training
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Virginia is for flower lovers

Fourteen years ago, the Virginia Department of Transportation participated in a highway beautification program called "Operation Wildflower," created by the Federal Highway Administration with the support of the U.S. Department of Transportation and the National Council of State Garden Clubs.

The idea was to plant thousands of wildflowers along the nation's highways in hopes of making them a more pleasant place to drive. Unfortunately, in many states the program did not take root and grow.

In Virginia, however, the program has "blossomed."

Root establishment

The program developed as a joint operation between the state highway department and the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs.

Things started with the garden clubs buying a few hundred pounds of seed, helping select species and participating in

the first plantings at the sites, which were spread around the state's nine highway districts.

The sites, 24 at first, were prepared by eliminating competition either by fumigation or applications of Roundup, and heavy disking or cultivating to prepare the ground for planting.

Today, at more than 60 sites, wildflowers are coming in naturally. "Considering what we're planting and what's coming in naturally, we've got some nice scenes of wildflowers," says Boyd Cassell, the highway department's landscape coordinator. "We have directives out not to mow these (planted) areas where they're coming in naturally."

"What we're planning to do," says landscape specialist Philip Baker, "is create a master map of the state showing the primary routes on the interstates with areas where we have planted certain species."

This, adds Cassell, "maybe will be an additional tourist attraction."
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Red perennial sweatpea and yellow coreopsis line parts of Virginia's Interstate-81 north of Salem.

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program, which landscape specialist Philip Baker administers, the state has about 350 certified applicators in its nine districts. "The programs generally last from one to two days," Baker says. "We have recertification, and most of the time, certification for the first time.

"Basically what we do is set up a program which entails safe use of pesticides." Baker, who is a horticulturist, adds that the program addresses areas such as calibration and target vegetation. "We use a series of class discussions, lectures, videos and slide tapes," he explains.

Once a potential applicator passes the test on the core manual administered by the state, he is eligible to take tests in Categories 3 and 6. "We review the manuals and give them a (sample) test," Baker notes. "Then we can get an idea of what we're dealing with. If it requires additional training for those people to get them prepared for the actual test that is given by the state department of agriculture and pesticide regulators then we do so."

'By employees having a better understanding of what they're using and the purpose that they're using it for, as far as complaints, we had virtually none.'

—Philip Baker

"Before, we had to rely on universities and extension agents for training," Cassell adds. "We had to get our training for certification and recertification at the whim of someone else. This way, we can do our own planning and do it during the off season so when the season gets here, we're ready."

The training program has been set up so that it can be administered separately in the nine state districts, saving time and money in the process.

"We found that not only does the program help tremendously in passing the test, it also gives them a background and understanding of what they're dealing with," Cassell comments.

The program has more than just a positive effect on pesticide application. "We teach them good P.R. with the traveling public," Baker notes. "When (employees) are on the highway, they're highly visible. The public really scrutinizes what they do. By those employees having a good understanding of what they're using and the purpose that they're using it for, as far as complaints, we have had virtually none."

"It's not that we may not make some mistakes," Cassell notes. "But when we make one, if we've been doing an overall good job, it's not as likely to be overcriticized." **LM**

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traction. We think perhaps it will be an added enticement. Hopefully, we'll be in a position that if someone's interested in looking at Virginia wildflowers in the spring or summer or fall, we can tell them which route to take for a nice ride.

"We have most of the information in from our field offices. Now Phil's going to be mapping it out."

Paying off

Roadsides now blossom with coreopsis, black-eyed Susans and bachelor's button. The program has also branched into the planting of daffodil bulbs in beds at highway welcome centers and the 39 rest areas around the state.

The program has been so successful that the garden club has won The National Landscape

award for roadside beautification six years running.

"Each time they win that, they're awarded \$1,000 in prize money," Baker notes. "Then what they do is donate that money to us and we purchase bulbs. With that \$1,000 we can purchase about 3,000 daffodil bulbs."

In addition, Baker says, garden club members statewide donate bulbs from their own back yards. "This past year there were something like 20,000 or 30,000 bulbs (donated) in our various districts. What we do is take those and put them in dead areas on the roadside and also we will include them in the rest areas."

Baker estimates that between bought and donated, close to 100,000 bulbs have been planted under the beautifica-



Philip Baker (left) and Boyd Cassell discuss ongoing improvements at one of Virginia's 39 highway rest areas.

tion program.

Besides wildflower plantings, the state has been taking other measures to keep the state's 53,000 miles of roadsides looking good, and just as importantly, the public happy. **LM**