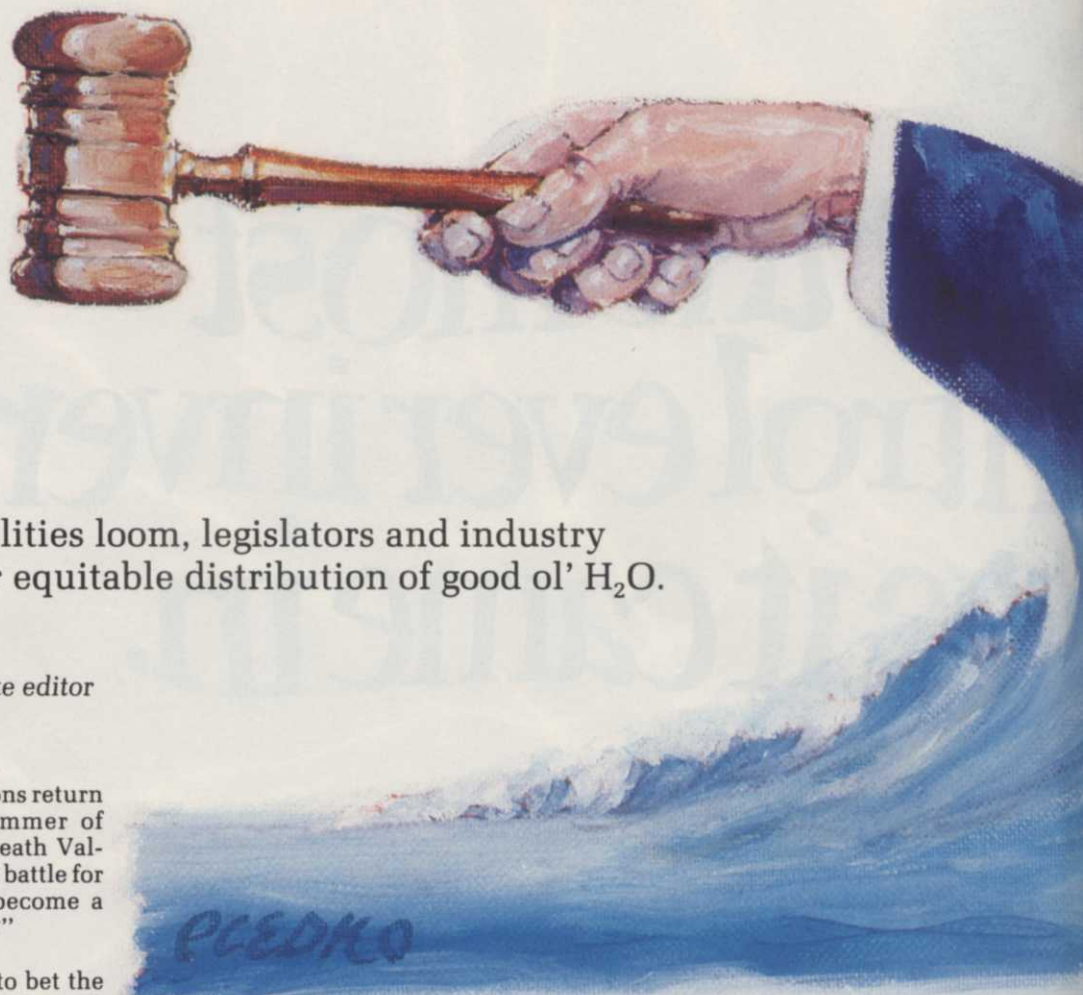


THE POLITICS OF WATER



As drought possibilities loom, legislators and industry associations vie for equitable distribution of good ol' H₂O.

By Terry McIver, associate editor

Will drought conditions return and make the summer of 1989 a rerun of "Death Valley Days?" And if so, will the battle for control of city reservoirs become a "Gunfight at the OK Corral?"

Maybe and maybe.

No expert is yet willing to bet the ranch that this summer's weather will match the drought conditions of 1988, which parched the Corn Belt, reducing soybean and grain production. But no one can deny that Mother Nature just hasn't been herself lately.

Warmer-than-usual temperatures prevailed this winter, with January temperatures reaching the 60s in many Midwestern cities. Played behind this scenario is the ongoing drama of water legislation and regulation. Every day of lower-than-normal rain or snowfall increases the possibility that communities everywhere will again be subject to strict rationing of local water supplies.

Enter the green industry

As a major water user, the green industry plays a large role in water politics. Unfortunately, due to its high visibility, it's often miscast as a water-wasting heavy—the black-caped villain who uses water to no end. Clarifying that image has been the task of

industry associations in touch with local legislators. What are they finding? At the bottom of the legislative well is the bottled message: participation in local legislation and education is crucial to making laws more fair and favorable to the green industry.

Randy Tischer, president of Green Velvet Sod Farms of Bellbrook, Ohio, believes the summer of 1988 was an example of "what may happen unless we (the sod industry) become better informed and have an impact on those who make

the decisions."

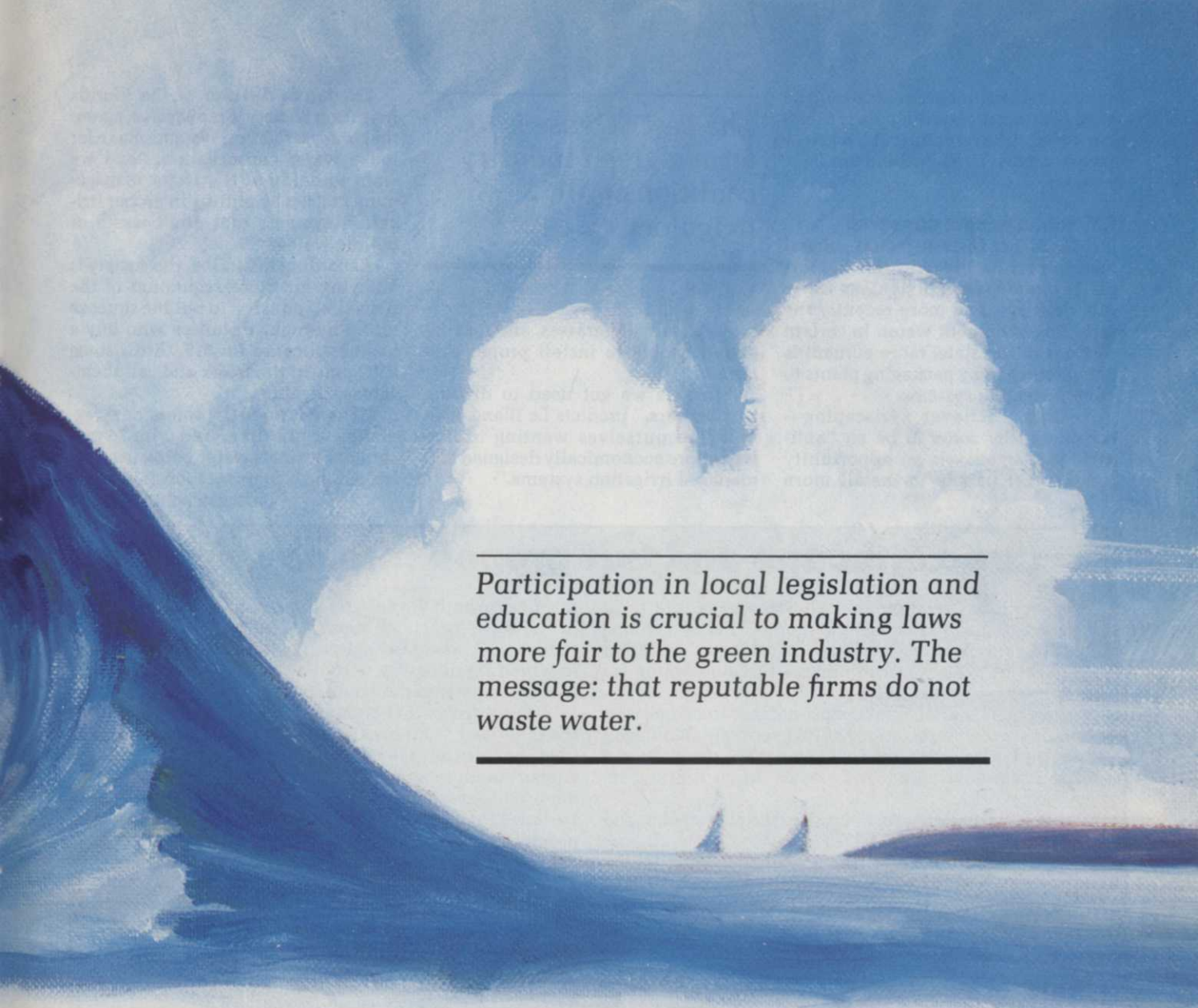
Tischer says that by August of 1988, with drought horror stories being reported nationwide, "some well-intentioned but ill-informed decisions were made.

"When household water taps went dry in Illinois," says Tischer, "the agricultural irrigators were identified as the cause of the misery. When city planners and those issuing building permits in Indiana and New Jersey announced their new regulations concerning landscaping and the use of water, in many cases they simply eliminated the plan's irrigation system/turfgrass allotment."



Fred L. McGee, Jr., executive director of the Florida Irrigation Society, fights the fly-by-nighters and promotes the use of efficient irrigation systems.

Preparing for the worst
An ongoing situation in



Participation in local legislation and education is crucial to making laws more fair to the green industry. The message: that reputable firms do not waste water.

California illustrates the action industry must take to get its share of water. To support the cause for an equitable water policy, William Pogue, president of Irrrometer Co. of Riverside, Calif., and past president of the Irrigation Association, helped form the Water Conservation Development Committee prior to the drought of 1988.

When the drought hit and pending legislation loomed, Pogue says the Irrigation Association bemoaned the fate the irrigation industry faced: less water and more legislation. Still, Pogue and the association pressed ahead with plans to educate those who might "inadvertently ruin our market."

The message: reputable lawn care and irrigation

companies do not waste water; the real culprits are poor irrigation systems and mismanagement of those systems.

Members of IA's water conservation development committee

have met several times with state assemblyman Steve Clute concerning proposed legislation—specifically, Assembly Bill 325. This bill would have required every local agency, city or county to adopt a "xeriscape ordinance" by January 1, 1991 for all new developments. The bill called for limits on turf in the

landscape, prohibitions on median strip planting requirements for warm-season grasses and requirements for use of water-efficient plants.

...Overruled!

Although the Irrigation Association's comments were "well received," according to Pogue, the bill was introduced without taking into account any of its suggestions.

Assemblyman Clute says the state department of water resources would coordinate cooperation between local governments, thereby eliminating conflicting legislation. "We've added language to the bill requiring adjacent local governments to cooperate in drafting ordinances," says Clute.

Clute says mandatory water meters were part of the plan, but many homeowners are reluctant to install them.

In regards to plant selection, Clute



William Pogue, president of Irrrometer Company, believes the best defense against unfair water policy is a coalition of green industry professionals.

says lawn care professionals would be asked for input regarding plant selection and other technical requirements, such as irrigation and drainage systems.

Efficient systems conserve

Bill Le Blanc, eastern region general manager for Hardie Irrigation of Florida, says state regulations affect water use, drainage, and more recently the recycling of effluent water. In certain sections of the state, more effluent is being returned by packaging plants to home irrigation systems.

Le Blanc believes xeriscaping—considered by some to be an “anti-turf” movement—is an opportunity for the turf people to install more

The best defense is to form a green industry coalition of all irrigators.

drought-tolerant grasses, and for irrigation people to install proper systems.

“Just as we got used to driving smaller cars,” predicts Le Blanc, “we will find ourselves wanting to live with more economically designed and managed irrigation systems.”

Executive director of the Florida Irrigation Society, Fred McGee, agrees that lousy irrigation systems make for lousy water conservation, “and we want to help out the water management district by putting in proper irrigation systems that don’t waste or pollute water.”

According to McGee, the society is lobbying for more regulation of the irrigation industry, to put the squeeze on fly-by-night installers who buy a business license for \$15, throw some PVC pipe in the trunk and call themselves irrigators.

“There is no such professional regulation at this time. And with 75 percent of Florida’s water being used for irrigation purposes, much is wasted.

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Can xeriscape and turf proponents co-exist?

In these times of drought and water bans, the term “xeriscape” is heard more and more. Cities and counties are even passing “xeriscape legislation,” so called because of xeriscape’s minimum turf and water requirements.

Proponents of turfgrass, most notably the American Sod Producers Association (ASPA), recently challenged the South Florida Water Management District on its use of the words “limited turf areas,” when drafting its xeriscape code.

After discussion with the ASPA, the district changed the code to read “practical turf areas.”

“Generally I agree with the concept of reducing water waste,” says ASPA president Ed Davis. “What I disagree strongly with is their (the Water District) attacks on turf as being the cause of water waste. The water that’s wasted is wasted by people, not by the turf.”

Davis is concerned over what he believes will happen in the long run if turf areas are drastically reduced.

“Turf is one of the best, if not the best, groundwater filters available. If we get a negative attitude towards turf, we’re going to get an imbalance. The evapotranspiration and other benefits of turf have been proven.”

Tom Teets, senior water use engineer and xeriscape project manager for the South Florida Water District, was surprised at ASPA’s objection.

“In Texas, which has a huge sod industry, there’s never been a problem with xeriscaping,” relates Teets. “They’ve accepted that turf does require more irrigation.”

The controversy goes back to southern Florida’s preparations for a model landscape code, which was named the Xeriscape Code.

“What the contractors had done,” recounts Bruce Adams, assistant director of land and water planning and national president of the Xeriscape Council, “was put together an advisory committee to hammer out a consensus document which would act as a model landscape code. It was then submitted and accepted by the district. That consensus document had representatives from every major affected industry, including the turfgrass people.

“We concluded that we were aiming at placing

turfgrass in both the design and function of a landscape, in the most ‘practical’ areas of landscape. And if we reduce turfgrass to any extent, it would be to that extent in which we did away with the hard-to-manage, hard-to-irrigate parts of the landscape.”

Adams insists that both groups are working toward the same goal. “Our backing of the turfgrass association is to make sure that we, the industry and the public support them in improving the grades of turfgrass that are produced—in looking at the new drought-resistant varieties that we and the industry are researching and promoting with our funding.”

ASPA executive director Doug Fender denies any adversarial relationship between turf and xeriscape. “I’m sure if you were to talk to xeriscape proponents, they would not describe their desired result as rocks, bushes and stumps, but as something which would allow for vegetation,” assures Fender. “The extreme element would have nothing growing. Somewhere in between there’s ground for us to talk and work together to achieve practical solutions for the environment.”

Fender believes the relationship between the “turf-ites” and xeriscapers could be improved by more communication. Letters between leaders of all groups and attendance at one another’s meetings are two ways to better relate.

“I think to some extent there’s a feeling that enemy camps are forming,” says Fender. “And, as with any problem, it’s from a lack of information.”

With the techniques and plant material now available, there is a huge opportunity to save large amounts of water and still maintain quality projects, believes Tom Ash, director of the Water Conservation Demonstration Garden in Riverside, California. “It’s more a question of changing the homeowner’s attitude,” he says. “The first aspect is limiting the size of lawns. Provide a lawn area for exactly what you need. I advise people to think about their lawn’s size and use water-efficient varieties like tall fescues, perhaps Bermudagrasses or zoysias that are being introduced into the industry, not eliminating lawns.

“I think the xeriscape fanatics who are into cactus and rocks are the extreme. They’re not going to attract many people and are probably going to hurt the intentions of the mainstream xeriscapers.”

—Terry McIver □

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This also contributes to shortages and water sprinkling bans."

As part of its role in the legislation game, the Florida Irrigation Association has developed its own guidelines for turf and landscape irrigation. A joint effort by the water management districts, the University of Florida Agricultural Engineering Department and irrigation professionals statewide, the plan is offered to other counties as a model.

Atlanta's water woes have received much press coverage by the city's local papers as evidenced by a

recent headline: "After Dry January, Summer Water Restrictions Loom for Metro Area."

Atlanta not so peachy

County Commissioner Lillian Webb says all local governments will have to keep water conservation measures in place. Water officials "don't want to pick on any one company," says Webb. "We try to work with landscapers, encouraging them to do more work in the fall and winter, and to use more rocks and pebbles, and less plants."

Tim Thoms, marketing director for Select Trees, Fayetteville, believes the legislative process is complicated by the levels of bureaucracy, with everyone shifting the blame onto someone else's shoulders. "First," Thoms recites, "you have the Atlanta Regional Commission, an advising and planning body made up of local governments and municipalities. They communicate with each municipality and county and try to reach agreements. And the county and metro agencies each have their own water bureaus."

Dick Bare, president of Arbor-Nomics in Norcross, Ga., questions why some industries are overlooked when it comes to water use restrictions.

"Chicken processors, using about a million gallons per week, weren't legislated at all to speak of, and yet we're picked upon because we're in a more visible industry," Bare notes. Sprinkling bans are off-target, he says, because the commercial systems run on cycles which aren't always in sync with the midnight-to-morning water window.



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Too many fly-by-night installers buy a business license and call themselves irrigators.

The signs for the summer are not encouraging. "Water levels are down and the weather trends are not good," says Bare. There's plenty of water in Atlanta, he says, but distributing it is the problem, since counties don't have the pipelines or reservoirs needed to supply it.

The best defense

"In order to be heard," insists Pogue, "we must first demonstrate true concern, not just engage in vocal drum beating. We must recognize some identifiable and important economic base or constituency, as well as other interests that could be either allies or are parties to be opposed."

The best defense is to form a green industry coalition of all irrigation, turf and landscaping contractors, nurserymen and of every entity involved in productive agriculture that requires irrigation.

After that, one can only hope that the spirit of compromise visits itself equally upon both houses, with worthwhile results. **LM**