

ANSWER THE CALL TO SAFETY



Be accident-free this season. Take the advice of these industry safety experts, and practice what they preach.

by Jack Simonds, contributing editor

Manufacturing company executives often post the safety records of employees near the paths the rank and file take to get to their offices. It is a time-tested way of often calling attention to the number of days without a time-loss injury.

The call-to-safety and its importance to bigger companies is self-evident. Injuries cost time, productivity and insurance entanglements. The common denominators: needless injuries and avoidable losses.

The green industry, measured by smaller work crews dispatched from more modest headquarters, must also turn an active eye toward worker safety. Dangers lurk, but safety can prevail when common sense steps are taken.

The 'smart employee'

Consider the methods Bill Tidwell uses in approaching safety with work crews in Orange County, Calif.

Tidwell, a supervisor in field operations for the county's Environmental Management Agency is directly responsible for maintaining the county's public green areas using 56 regular employees and 50 to 70 inmates from the county jail system for tree trimming, ground clearing, weed control and other tasks.

"The best safety device is a smart employee," says Tidwell. "Safety equipment is only effective if you put it on and you keep it on."

California, which imposes strong licensing standards for workers in the green industry, requires certification for pesticide users, entailing a 20-

hour course study and additional 20-hour continuing education coursework every other year.

Those courses, coming from California's OSHA, are augmented with another safety step Tidwell particularly favors.

"It is called a tailgate meeting," explains Tidwell. Under the plan, line workers meet in open-ended discussion every 10 days to discuss safety issues and incidents which actually occurred in the field.

"I like those sessions. We often talk about what went wrong, how someone got into a situation and how to avoid it in the future," says Tidwell.

Injuries are reduced

Tailgate meetings, he believes, pay in dividends which aren't immediately



Bill Tidwell's spray crew meets every 10 days to talk safety.



Tidwell: "The best safety device is a smart employee."

shown, but can be tracked. He says crew workers also discuss safety equipment—eye protection, special clothing and other gear—which is used in the real work-a-day world.

"Our crews have the safety equipment they're supposed to have. I go out to job sites to see for myself that they're using the equipment. I make sure that happens," Tidwell says.

"We have seen a marked decrease in two years in the number of employees who are injured in a long-term way. We've reduced (those injuries) immensely."

The department, for instance, has not seen a chain saw-related accident in three years.

Tidwell notes however, that safety clothing worn during spraying season holds special challenges for the wearer.

Hot Southern California days, Tidwell says, make it tough for crews to strictly maintain wearing the coveralls.

Other safety gear has improved over the years, Tidwell says. He particularly notes a new hard hat design which stays on the head in a variety of positions, is equipped with lightweight ear protectors and face visor and, most importantly, is favored by line workers because of its ease-of-wear.

Also, Tidwell has equipped his staff with an ankle-high boot with built-in insole that line workers have found comfortable for an entire eight-hour shift.

Company standards higher

As Tidwell contends daily with safety challenges, Ed Neuffer, president of Safety Equipment and Supply Co. of Fort Wayne, Ind. sees the advances of gear and clothing and tries to keep pace with what green industry workers want and what works in the field.

Neuffer says that in some cases, the industry "has not matured" in its worker protection for employees in daily contact with pesticides. At the same time, bigger lawn care operators and maintenance companies are making great strides to insure worker safety.

Neuffer says all gloves and boots today should be made of a nitrile or neoprene compounds, material that can be molded into gear that looks and works like common rubbers, but has stronger resistance powers against skin exposure to chemicals.

The worst footwear—and at times the most common—Neuffer says, are tennis shoes and leather boots. Definite industry no-nos; Neuffer says chemicals can absorb into both mate-

rials, and, even with routine washing, build up over time. The footwear can retain harmful portions of a variety of chemicals used in the industry.

Operating guidelines

During spraying, Neuffer echoes Tidwell's standards for turn-out gear: respirators, goggles and a hard hat equipped with a face shield. Clothing, particularly cotton, should be washed daily.

But Neuffer sees hope in a Du Pont Co.

spun and woven material marketed as Tyvek; particularly when mixing, loading or spraying chemicals.

Tyvek and other gear have disadvantages, too, Neuffer says. The fabric does not "breathe" particularly well, making workers hot. Also, the gear, coupled with a respirator and eye goggles, can sometimes have a chilling effect on a homeowner.

"Somewhere, there has to be a happy medium," says Neuffer.

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Stock up on safety info

Perhaps the basics bear repeating as, for much of the country, the landscape and lawn care industries gear up for full spring-time workloads.

From the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI) comes an updated pamphlet entitled "Outdoor Safety Tips," timed with the month for increased on-the-job safety awareness.

Basic tips from the OPEI include:

- Knowledge of the controls, capacities and purposes of power equipment. The OPEI recommends reading the operation manual fully before using new gear.

- Proper dress for the job. Long, close-fitting clothes, sturdy shoes and other protections like safety glass. Other special clothing and protective wear are called for in special situations.

- Safe handling of gasoline. Fill the tank before starting small engines. Also, wipe up spills immediately. Store petroleum products only in approved containers and away from the house. Never smoke around gasoline.

- Clean up the work area beforehand of such potential projectiles as golf balls, rocks and other small items which might be hurled from mowing machinery. Pets and children should be kept away during mowing.

- Follow manufacturers' written procedures. Along with operating procedures, OPEI, along with all manufacturers, strongly recommend keeping up with maintenance. When unclogging, OPEI reminds

workers to turn off the engine completely and take the extra insurance step of disconnecting the spark plug line. Keep hands and feet clear of moving parts and do not remove safety devices or safety labels.

For a copy of this safety guide, write to OPEI at 24500 Center Ridge Rd., Suite 250, Westlake, Ohio 44145. The institute also produces safety news, films, checklists, brochures and public service announcements.

Industry insiders, like Joe McDonald, a marketing coordinator at John Deere Co., highlight the importance of maintenance and encourage crew leaders to daily look over equipment, eyeing oil or greasing needs, odd vibrations, noises, excess smoke and other hints.

Paul Loomans, a marketing coordinator at Deere, agrees: "Preventive maintenance is a most important practice (which) can help stop field failure," says Loomans. Quick fixes in the field, he says, "present the greatest opportunity for accidents to happen."

Quick fixes often come as the operator is working under fatigue and using makeshift tools.

Deere, like other manufacturers, installs deadman controls on its walk-behind models, and for mid-size riders (14 hp and up) the company has gone to a two-pedal control system for forward and reverse. Engaging the rider requires a distinctive foot motion which McDonald claims makes the vehicle easier to control in panic situations.

—Jack Simonds □

Other equipment on Neuffer's list: outdoor safety storage sheds for chemicals, wheel chocks on all vehicles to deter accidental truck roll, and emergency spill kits aboard all vehicles and at home base.

Spills: what to do

Spills present a unique set of problems which require the right set of reactions. But as in most emergencies, common sense is the first order of business.

Consider, says Ohio EPA spokesman Jim Leach, the severity of the spill first.

In minor mishaps, the crew can perform quick mop-ups. But most spills should first be reported to the local fire department, as many local forces are trained in assessing spill severity.

In Ohio, says Leach, local emergency planning commissions may also react to larger spills. In some instances the state agriculture department has been empowered to advise and react to spills, along with the natural resources department.

These cases hold true when the mishap has occurred near a waterway. EPA agencies also have assessors



Neuffer: Industry is maturing, becoming more safety conscious.

who can assist in a range of responses.

From the perspective of Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA), the industry is "not doing all that well" in policing itself on safe driving habits and hazardous materials handling.

Generally, Delaney says, employee driving records should be collected for those who will be transporting potentially hazardous substances. Now, those driving histories are mandated

and overseen by the federal Department of Transportation. Delaney says the controlling agency varies from state to state.

Specialized training for driving bigger pesticide and herbicide trucks is available; particularly in turning the vehicles in urban areas.

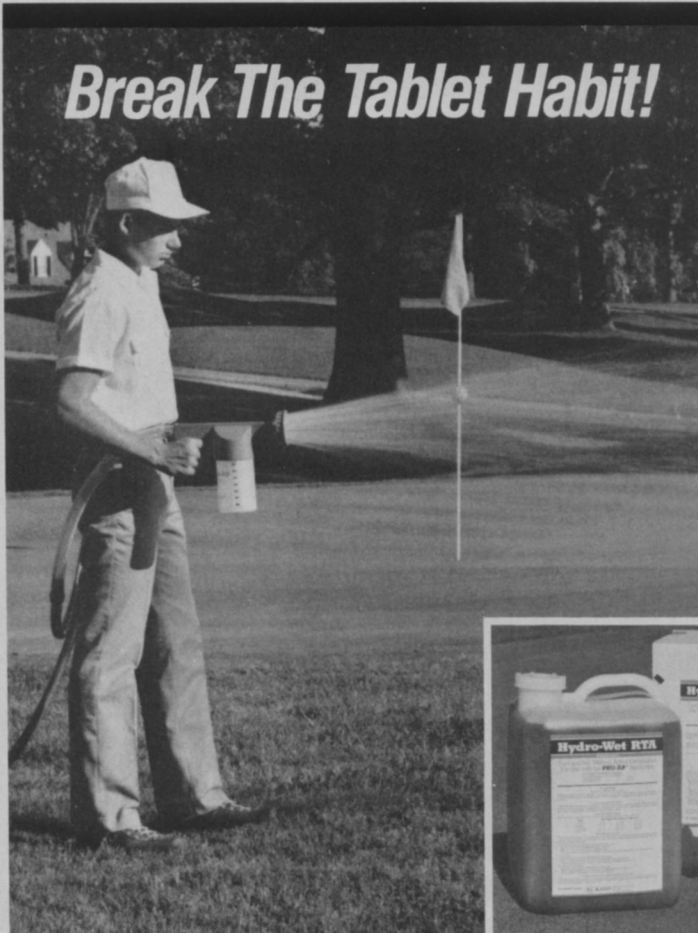
The PLCAA, for instance, offers for \$25 an audio and workbook course entitled "Spill Buster." Details are available by calling the association at 800-458-3456.

But with a PLCAA membership of 800 and with an estimated 5,000 landscapers nationwide, there seems little in the way of a central clearinghouse for safety practices.

"I don't think there is enough (advance) preparation by many companies," says Delaney.

"Companies don't often deal with things until they become a problem." He adds that some larger, national lawn care companies offer strong safety programs not only for their employees, but for others in related fields.

These questions surface as the EPA itself appears to be preparing new worker protection standards for farm and lawn care workers. **LM**



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