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## Pacific Northwest drought catches industry by surprise

**SEATTLE, Wash.**—One of the most severe droughts in Pacific Northwest history is drying up the green industry.

Suffering the most are firms directly involved in new lawn and/or landscape installations, sod farms and nurseries—particularly those serving the greater Seattle market.

“There’s no question we’re being treated unfairly. We’re being targeted because we’re so visible,” says Mike Bushmaker of The Highridge Corp., a landscape contractor here.

Green industry businesses absorbed the first broadside in April and May (the height of landscape selling season) when Seattle and surrounding communities urged homeowners not to install (or have installed) new lawns or landscapes. Nurseries; landscape designers, contractors and installers; sod growers; hydroseeders—all saw business fall or not materialize.

In spite of a week of unusually wet weather in early July, the drought dug in as the summer progressed. This past winter there was precious little snow to refill Cascade Mountain streams which recharge reservoirs.

No one can predict when the drought will ease. Even when it does, this summer’s shortage points out the inadequacy of a water delivery system that hasn’t had a substantial enlargement since 1968.

**You’re under arrest!**—Seattle and the 28 suburbs served by the Seattle Water Department (1.2 million people) moved first to drastically reduce outdoor water use, including passing lawn watering bans monitored by *water police*. Those found watering their lawns face fines of \$100 to \$500.

Shrubs and flowers can still be watered with hoses with shutoff nozzles, or with irrigation systems if they’re separate from turfed areas.

“In the long run these types of restrictions never work,” says Bushmaker, who also chairs the newly formed Washington Coalition for Sensible Water Management (WCSWM). At least 10 allied green industry groups lend support to WCSWM.

(WCSWM says there are more than 3,000 landscaping, nursery and related businesses, employing about 25,000 workers in and around Seattle.)

Although WCSWM representatives met with city officials and pleaded the environmental implications of the watering ban and its economic harm to green industry businesses, water officials wouldn’t compromise.

**Drought a wake-up call**—Rod Bailey, Evergreen Services Corp., says periodic rainfall so far this summer has been enough to keep most Seattle-area lawns alive, and maintenance/mowing firms working although at a reduced schedule.

Even so, the outdoor watering restrictions are causing landscape firms to alter their services. “We’re standing on our heads doing manual watering of trees and shrubs,” he says.

“Many plants have become turf-water dependent. They started into wilt as soon as the lawn’s turf turned brown.”

Bailey says the drought is a wake-up call to green industry professionals in the Pacific Northwest. It’s telling them that they need a stronger public education effort, and have to be a part of the water-use decision-making process.

Seattle’s water woes won’t be solved until its system is upgraded, he explains. The burgeoning King County area has outgrown its water supply system, and the green industry is paying the price.

—Ron Hall