

Benefits among the best in the green industry for athletic field managers

■ Ah, the joys of being an athletic field manager! Forget the weeds. Forget the complaints from irate parents. Besides the feeling of accomplishment that often accompanies watching a bunch of kids knock around on a safe, beautiful field, another of the business's true attractions is the list of financial benefits provided by employers.

From 401k plans to paid sick leave to partial or full retirement, these benefits are unequalled in the green industry.

Almost 100 percent of athletic field managers who responded to an LM survey last month get paid holidays and paid vacations. In addition, more than 90 percent of the sample receive paid sick leave, and health insurance that is at least partially paid by the employer.

(By contrast, less than half of all lawn care companies offer paid vacations and holidays, and less than one-third offer

They're an experienced, stable bunch who have been able to provide the best playing surfaces for the least money.

paid sick leave.)

It is no wonder, then, that 65.4 percent of our sample has been involved in maintaining athletic fields for 10 years or more. Just 18.2 percent has been involved for fewer than six years.

"It's pretty easy to get up and go to work in the morning," notes Steve Wightman, field supervisor for Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego.

Part of the reason for lack of turnover is because of the job's very nature, he says. "It takes at least three to four years before

you feel comfortable preparing a field, regardless of how much you know. It takes a while to grow accustomed to your job because of all the variables."

John Michalko of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland thinks students on college campuses are a factor. "Here, the customer changes every four years," he says. "I think the reason people stay around is security and dedication."

In August, LM's survey questionnaire was mailed to 750 athletic turf managers who subscribe to the magazine. By mid-September, we had received 174 valid answers, a response rate of 23.3 percent.

The average respondent maintains 10.8 baseball or softball fields, 6.9 football or soccer fields. Other fields maintained include intramural, practice, lawn bowling, all-purpose, rugby, parade and band, disc golf, radio aircraft, field hockey and volleyball. Average acreage is 104.7.

THE NATIONAL SCOPE...

■ Projecting the average (mean) responses obtained in our survey to the national scope, we are able to come up with some useful figures for the size of the total domestic athletic field maintenance industry.

There are approximately 12,000 park systems and 20,000 high schools, colleges and universities in the U.S. with football, soccer and/or baseball programs. Therefore, the total dollars spent on athletic field maintenance in the U.S. each year—including employee wages, salaries and benefits—appears to be very close to **\$2.0 billion**. (This figure adjusted for abnormal survey responses.)

Dollars spent on purchased supplies breaks down something like this:

High-end equipment (aerators, trucks, tractors)	\$499 million
Fertilizers and pesticides	\$434 million
Mowing equipment	\$322 million
Irrigation	\$178 million
Turfseed/sod	\$112 million

Diane Gildemaster, district supervisor for the Sioux Falls (S.D.) Parks and Recreation

Department, is on the high side of being a typical respondent. Her department maintains 33 baseball or softball fields and 41 football or soccer fields.

"We're finding that our existing leagues would like to expand," she reports, "but we just don't have the facilities. People are demanding more quality and more use.

Thankfully, the associations are starting to pick up some of the maintenance costs."

As might be expected, nearly all the survey respondents reported mowing and fertilizing fields. However, a surprisingly high 94.0 percent re-reported aerating

at least one of their fields on at least an annual basis.

"Our school is not big enough to have a football team, so our soccer fields are being used constantly," notes Denton Smith of Lenox (Mass.) Memorial High School. "We have huge leagues, spring summer and fall, and our fields are being pounded. But aeration does a hell of a job" of keeping them safe and usable.

Another respondent, Jim Robinson of the Garner (N.C.) Parks and Recreation Department, has even tried deep-tine aeration, a procedure that is becoming more popular on golf courses but is not yet being used on a widespread basis by athletic turf managers.

"We had problems with overuse and abuse on our football and soccer fields," Robinson says. "We contract the Verti-Drain aeration from a local golf course. It's an expensive operation.

"The jury's still out on it because we had to get right back on the fields this year, so it was not a fair test. However, damage sustained this year was kept to a minimum."

Weed control, reseeding/overseeding

1994 State of Athletic Turf Maintenance

TYPES OF FIELDS MAINTAINED

	% of sample	Mean	Projected to readership ¹
BASEBALL/SOFTBALL	95.0	10.8	50,643
FOOTBALL/SOCCER	87.1	6.9	29,665
OTHER²	42.1	3.6	7,481
TOTAL FIELDS MAINTAINED	100.0	21.2	87,789
TOTAL ACRES MAINTAINED	100.0	104.7	516,800

¹Total athletic field readership of Landscape Management magazine, June 1994 = 4,936

²"Other" types of fields mentioned in survey: intramural, practice, lawn bowling, all-purpose, field hockey, volleyball, recreational, open turf, passive play, parade, band, rugby, playground, disc golf, radio aircraft

Type of Maintenance Performed (by percent of sample)

MOWING 98.2%

FERTILIZATION 96.4%

AERATION 94.0%

WEED CONTROL 87.4%

RESEEDING, OVERSEEDING 83.8%

IRRIGATION 81.4%

INSECT CONTROL 52.1%

DISEASE CONTROL 47.3%

(Other maintenance performed: topdressing, dethatching, painting, dragging infields, sod installation, levelling, litter control, safety control, fence maintenance, light maintenance, bleacher maintenance)

and irrigation are other tasks performed by more than 80 percent of our sample readers. Athletic field maintenance, however, doesn't end with the turf. Most respondents report being responsible for infield maintenance, and many report painting, levelling, safety monitoring and fence, light and bleacher maintenance as allied duties.

"We've got state-of-the-art infield maintenance equipment," boasts Tim Stubbs of the Bowling Green (Ohio) Parks and Recreation Department. "We use our Bannerman Diamond Master to level our infields on a daily basis, and we've been told we have the best infields around. Bowling Green State University's athletic department has even borrowed our equipment to use on their varsity baseball field."

Gildemaster says Sioux Falls rolled its fields for the first time this year after a recent regrading program. "It took out some of the little ruts we wouldn't have normally been able to rake out," she says, "and the community is really proud of the fields now."

According to the survey results, athletic field managers are major purchasers of mowers of all sizes, aerators, irrigation equipment and compact tractors. In addition, three out of four managers purchase dry-applied fertilizer and turfseed on an annual basis.

Average annual budget for athletic field maintenance was more than \$162,000, but that was skewed upward by four respondents who reported budgets of \$2 million or more. More typically, the annual budget for materials is around \$30,000, the median response.

Budgets, the survey notes, are growing incrementally. More than half of our respondents reported no growth or negative growth in their budgets from 1993 to 1994, though the overall average was plus 0.5 percent. Next year, there will be about a 1.6 percent increase in budgets overall, our survey reports.

By far, the greatest portion of the respondents were affiliated with public parks—58.7 percent. An additional 32.3 percent work for schools or universities.

—Jerry Roche

NEXT MONTH:

State of the Landscape Industry

PRODUCT CATEGORY	% OF SAMPLE	MEDIAN DOLLARS	MEAN DOLLARS	PROJECTED TO CIRC.
Soil aerators	24.5%	\$2,000	\$4,394	\$5,313,752
Fert./herb. combos	63.3%	\$3,000	\$7,479	\$23,368,046
Domestic pick-ups	38.8%	\$15,000	\$22,200	\$42,516,730
Dry-app. fertilizer	76.9%	\$2,750	\$4,727	\$17,942,671
Ornamental fert.	30.6%	\$1,000	\$1,860	\$2,809,374
Liquid-app. fertilizer	16.3%	\$1,000	\$2,025	\$1,629,250
Post-emerg. herbicides	63.9%	\$1,000	\$2,269	\$7,156,662
Pre-emerg. herbicides	47.6%	\$1,000	\$2,773	\$6,515,263
Small mowers	32.7%	\$1,000	\$2,892	\$4,667,896
Mid-size mowers	21.1%	\$8,000	\$10,694	\$11,137,758
Large mowers	40.1%	\$14,000	\$17,129	\$33,904,046
Turfgrass sod	40.1%	\$1,500	\$3,937	\$7,792,646
Irrigation/sprinklers	66.0%	\$2,000	\$8,456	\$27,547,619
Compact tractors	28.6%	\$14,000	\$20,655	\$29,158,581
Turf fungicides	17.7%	\$1,000	\$4,950	\$4,324,676
Turf insecticides	29.3%	\$1,000	\$2,249	\$3,252,612
Turf-seed	74.8%	\$2,000	\$2,589	\$9,588,919
TOTAL				\$238.6 million