

Seeking a 'common voice' at the Capitol

Politicians claim that their approach to national issues is shaped by the people 'back home.' Yet, special interest groups continue to drive legislation in the U.S. today.

by JERRY ROCHE/Editor-in-Chief

Consider groups that provide input and incentives to legislators, beginning with high-profile organizations like the United Auto Workers, American Association of Retired Persons, National Rifle Association, Ralph Nader's various "consumer protection" organizations. The full list is virtually endless.

And, hesitant as we are to admit it, the bigger the special interest group, the more wallop it packs in the halls of Congress.

The green industry does not lack special interest organizations. Rather, it lacks special interest organizations with enough clout to make much of a difference.

With the exception of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, no industry association has 2,000 members or more. Some association executives argue that their members are companies rather than individuals, but the fact is that 1,000 small businesses still don't amount to a hill of beans in Washington.

Is the time right for the green industry's professional organizations to start planning a merger that would effectively coalesce and carry to Washington the wishes of thousands upon thousands of landscapers and groundsmen?

"Associations are merging," Debra Atkins, executive director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), freely admits. "Every day, I hear about more mergers."

Some existing associations have joined forces in the past. The Green Industry Expo draws from ALCA, the Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) and the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA).

"The Green Industry Expo shows that organizations can work together, just like the cooperation between ALCA and American Association of Nurserymen (AAN) on government regulations," notes Atkins.

Less than two years ago, the AAN and ALCA held serious merger talks that eventually broke off. However, a special task force report noted this:

"Industry response to the environmental movement has been generally effective, but is far too limited. The industry must speak more loudly, more often, and more cohesively to ensure that the public's interest in ecology remains a positive force for us."

Tom Delaney, government relations expert for the PLCAA, doesn't wholly agree with the need for "one voice."

"Sometimes, the different organizations are on separate sides of an issue," he points out. "We have to be responsible to our members and who we represent. There are times when we have to keep our uniqueness. We have our separate marching orders



James: RISE very distinct from user groups.



Bolusky: Different green industry segments have different priorities and issues.

from members, and after we do that, we can look for commonalities.

"Certainly, though, when we need to be on the same side, we all know each other and we do cooperate."

Continued cooperation

All the national green industry executives gather twice a year. Last summer, it was at the headquarters of the American Society of Landscape Architects in suburban Washington, D.C.

"Often, we find things we can work together on," Atkins notes. "Like the Gallup Poll we did last year [homeowner attitudes on lawn care and landscaping]. When you split up the costs on projects like that, it can be a very attractive proposition."

Ben Bolusky of the AAN, which has a strong presence in Congressional circles, thinks the green industry needs a more unified voice.

"Would the green industry benefit from stronger cohesion? You bet!," says Bolusky.

"One of the great strengths of the green industry is its diversity—but that's also its greatest vulnerability. Different segments of the green industry have different priorities and different issues. Not all of them may be in synch, but most are. The potential for creating a unified green industry is largely untapped."

Who's piqued?

Of the associations whose interest might be piqued by this concept, the AAN and PLCAA now deliver the best governmental relations services to their members. Both hold annual meetings in Washington (AAN's "Legislative Leadership Conference," PLCAA's "Day on the Hill") to help their members get a better hold on Congressional operations.

"The AAN has had a long-standing gov-



Atkins: Gallup Poll an example of cooperation.

ernment representation," Bolusky notes. "It's one of the primary reasons members join and continue to renew their memberships. And the AAN has been able to leave its mark. We represent all segments of the industry—growers, landscapers and retail garden centers—and provide a single industry position."

The AAN is always seeking to increase its grassroots base. It recently said it would actively seek the help of state

nursery and landscape associations to support its Lighthouse Fund, a program designed to communicate national issues back to members of state organizations.

And, certainly, don't forget the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), the largest, best-funded and most independent of all green industry associations.

"We are a part of a number of coalitions, including Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE)," notes the GCSAA's Pat Jones. "Pesticides and specialty chemicals are the largest common issue the whole green industry shares, and a lot of folks are doing good things together. On those big issues, we're all more unified than we've ever been before."

The RISE factor

RISE, which carries the message of specialty product manufacturers, formulators and distributors to law-makers, accepts end-user groups as members. However, "RISE does not try to represent those associations unless we pre-agree on an issue—and vice versa," notes RISE exec-

utive director Allen James.

"They are independent, and they have their own representatives. The associations prefer to consider it a partnership. It's an independence issue; as a matter of fact, they are pretty resistant to having their members believe they're represented by RISE."

Other factors

Bolusky says three factors would determine the effectiveness of a green industry umbrella agency watching over, and speaking to, the Washington crowd:

1) There would have to be the perception of being a single voice for an entire industry. In some industries where multiple "voices" exist, the members of Congress don't know which way to turn.

2) There would have to be grass roots support for that one voice. The organization would have to be able to provide members of Congress with the thinking of its constituency "back home."

3) It would have to be located in the metro Washington D.C. area, to be available to meet with legislators on a moment's notice.

"The PLCAA and GCSAA are very important elements of the green industry," notes Bolusky. "They've got a strong track record, but from a logistics standpoint, they are at a disadvantage not being here in Washington."

What form?

Many options exist for forming an "umbrella" agency.

- The most practical would draw government relations experts from the existing associations to form a new organization. The sole purpose of the new group would be to provide

a united voice in Washington, and to report back to its contributing associations.

- Another option is a "federation," or "league," which would serve to keep the



Delaney: Member concerns come first within each organization.

existing associations and societies intact. But their individual powers would be subordinated to a central authority—perhaps an empowered under-director or small council—in the area of governmental regulations.

• Finally, there is the concept of a grand merger: of ALCA, AAN, PLCAA, PGMS—perhaps even the GCSAA—and any other interested associations.

The hang-ups

The last option remains highly unlikely, mainly because the GCSAA is so financially independent that it normally doesn't seek assistance. The powerful Lawrence, Kansas-based organization just recently hired a team of attorneys to serve as Washington lobbyists.

"Our Board of Directors has approved a much more pro-active stance," notes Jones. GCSAA government relations counsel

Cynthia Kelly adds, "But we're looking at cooperating with a lot of different coalitions like the Alliance for Reasonable Regulation. They're a good way to share information, when we have consensus on an issue—on an issue-by-issue basis."

Another factor: not all the above organizations might be interested in supplying their members with a government relations service.

"We're kind of an odd-ball organization," notes John Gillan, executive director of the PGMS. "The members are very fragmented. We have not had the clamor for more voice in government regulations. We do some ancillary things—dip in and out—but it's not high on the board's priority list."

Certainly, the willingness to participate is of utmost importance.

"To make it work, the system has to be right for the [individual association] leader-

ships," ALCA's Atkins is quick to point out.

Bolusky agrees. "When you talk about establishing an 'umbrella' organization, you're talking about the politics of existing organizations and personalities," he notes. "Even so, you've got some consolidation happening now: the AAN is an umbrella agency for the National Landscape Association, the Wholesale Nursery Growers of America and the Garden Centers of America."

"There are things I'd like to be doing more of, so we leave that dialog open," says Atkins. "There's been more cooperation in the last few years among associations. Everyone's very open to new ideas. It's a matter of the timing and the economy."

"The Federation of Green Industry Associations." Sound far off? It probably is. But, depending on how the winds of national politics blow in coming years, it may not be as far off as you think. **LM**

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