

Weather smarts

for turf/landscape pros

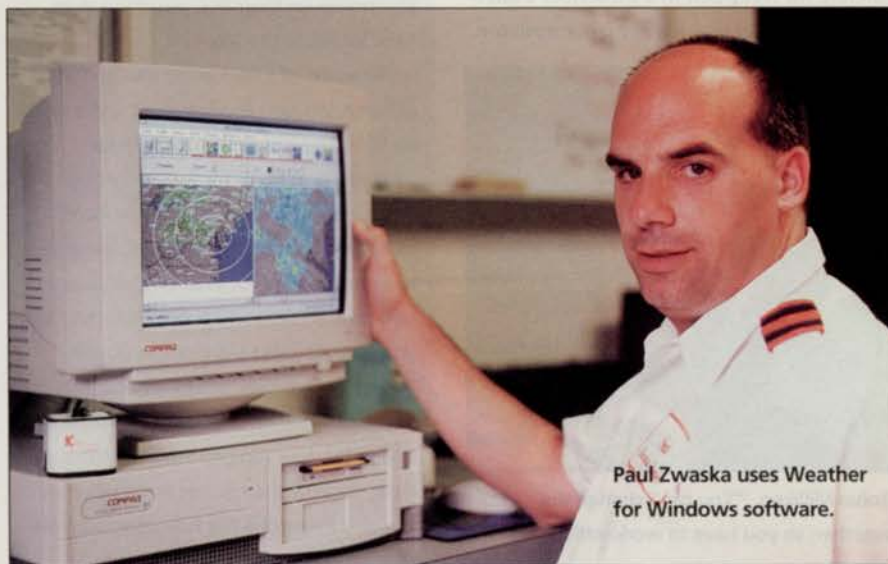
If you're still relying on your local "weatherman" for advice on planning your day's turf or landscape chores, it's time you read this.

by Ron Hall / SENIOR EDITOR

Paul Zwaska looked out his small office window onto the playing field of Orioles Park at Camden Yard and concluded that he had to delay the start of the day's game with the visiting Milwaukee Brewers.

The Baltimore grounds manager didn't base his decision on the clouds he saw building over the stands. He based it on the moving satellite images he was receiving over the PC in his office. The PC's monitor showed an irregularly shaped patch of green indicating a weather front, containing smaller patches of yellow and orange, rain, approaching the ball park from the northwest.

Behind the front Zwaska saw no activity on the monitor, meaning clear skies. And behind that, some more green blotches approached. He concluded (accurately, it turned out) that the Orioles and



Paul Zwaska uses Weather for Windows software.

Brewers, after the initial 20 minute drizzle delay, would have about three hours to play that afternoon's game before the next rain arrived.

When the mid-day drizzle stopped, the O's grounds crew whisked the tarps from the manicured infield and the game unfolded. At its conclusion, the rains returned, just as Zwaska predicted.

Zwaska received this accurate weather information from a software package, Weather for Windows, available only from Weather Services International (WSI), Billerica, MA. It requires a 386SX or greater personal computer with Microsoft Windows 3.1 or higher, and a modem.

Not all turf/landscape managers need such an exact picture of the weather. But, since it's easy and affordable to get, why not? Up-to-hour radar images and, depending on the service, 15-minute updates are literally available to

anyone thanks to today's radar and satellite technology. Weather information can be accessed through desktop monitors, either a personal computer or one supplied by a contracted forecasting service.

Turf/landscape business owners and managers can use this knowledge to schedule work crews (construction, mowing, snow plowing) and chemical applications. It helps them irrigate efficiently too. In fact, it's difficult to think of any turf or landscape task that's not dependent upon the weather.

"In our business, weather is a huge factor. It can make you or break you," acknowledges Robin Milliken, H&R Landscape & Lawn Care, Overland Park, KS. "You can't change it, so you have to work with it."

Late in 1995 Milliken's company contracted with Omaha, Neb.-based Data Transmission Network Corporation for a DTN Turf Manager weather system. "We can pull up current conditions; city-by-city temperatures, overnight lows, predicted highs, surface winds, the possibility of precipitation. The information is updated every 15 minutes," says Milliken.



Hourly radar images of approaching rain tell the crew at Oriole Park at Camden Yards if they need to ready the tarps.

Instant uplinks

Here's how the DTN service works: The company's weather center receives weather information from numerous sources, including the National Weather Service. The data is instantly uplinked to a satellite for reception to a subscriber's satellite antenna and into his/her color monitor.



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Nineteen regional radar maps indicate county-level precipitation. Image maps are updated every 15 minutes. Users lease the antenna and monitor from DTN which describes the monitor as an "easy-to-read electronic magazine." It's not a PC, like Zwaska uses in at Baltimore's Camden Yard.

Gary Wilder, Director of Golf Maintenance at Calloway Gardens Resort in Pine Mountain, GA, has been using the DTN system for several years and describes it as one of the most valuable tools he uses.

"The first thing I do when I arrive here in the morning is look at it, and it's the last thing I look at when I leave," says Wilder. "I have six superintendents who work with me here, and in an eight-hour-day, we probably use it all eight hours."

Wilder says the weather forecasts provided by the system allow his managers to more efficiently schedule their labor needs along with more obvious benefits such as the application of chemicals, fertilizer and irrigation.

"We've had cases where we would come in expecting to spray fungicides on the greens, and with over 300,000 square feet of greens that quite an expense. The

Navigate the 'Web' for weather data

Weather information is available on the Internet.

In fact, turf/landscape managers can call up local and regional forecasts, including long-range forecasts, with just a few keystrokes on their PCs, assuming they have access to the Internet.

All kinds of information can be found at cirrus.sprl.umich.edu/wxnet, a site developed by the University of Michigan.

If you don't want to wade through this much information, call up www.intellicast.com/ right away. Intellicast is a registered trade mark of Weather Services International (WSI) which provides the radar and Nexrad (Next Generation Doppler Radar) images over the Internet.

Need a one-hour update of the Nexrad image for your region? Find out the three letter code of the nearest large city near you and keystroke the following address, calling up Cleveland, for example:

www.intellicast.com/weather/cle/nexrad/. Or, the Detroit site:

www.intellicast.com/weather/dtw/nexrad/.

For a larger radar view of your region use the same address with appropriate 3-letter city codes, but replace the final word "nexrad" with the word "radar".

If you don't know the three-letter code of your city, you can access the radar and Nexrad images you want by entering cirrus.sprl.umich.edu/wxnet/radsat.html. This should give you a map of the U.S. showing every major city. Click on the icon of the city you want, and wade through several icons to retrieve the weather information you need. Depending on the speed of your PC and your Internet access provider, it shouldn't take you more than couple of minutes.

Be advised, this weather information is not "real time." It is, at best one hour old.

If you can add to this information for the benefit of other turf/landscape managers, please contact Ron Hall, Landscape Management magazine, 216/891-2636. Fax: 216/891-2683. E-mail: lscap@en.com



Weather forecasts allow managers to more efficiently schedule their labor needs and not risk wasting product applications.

local weather forecaster here might say there's only a 20 percent change of rain, but when we look on the radar and see the rain is almost here, we hold up and don't spray," says Wilder. "We've literally saved thousands of dollars."

Significant savings also come from more

precise scheduling of work on the resort's 63-hole complex. If Wilder can look at the DTN images and determine that rain, say, will last all afternoon, he can let the workers go home. "It can save us as \$250 an hour on a normal hourly rate," he says.

David Mellor, assistant director of grounds at Milwaukee County Stadium, has been using the system since last April. "When we got it I wasn't sure how helpful it would be and I was worried that it would be so technical that you would almost have to be a meteorologist to use it. But you don't," he says.

Grounds Manager Gary Vanderberg will often ask umpires to view the images during game rain delays. "To be able to see the weather like that really lets you know what's going on," says Mellor.

For more information about Weather Services International's Weather for Windows software package contact John Bosse, WSI, 508/670-5000. For information about DTN Turf Manager contact Jay Ferguson, 800/610-0777.