

# SAFETY MAKES 'CENTS'

*There are a lot of good reasons to build a culture of safety into your green industry operation, but the most obvious one involves money.*

by RON HALL/ Managing Editor

**I**t amazes Bill Sisley that green industry professionals put themselves or employees at risk by ignoring basic safety rules, particularly involving power equipment. But they do. Much too often they do.

Sisley is manager technical support/equipment for Lesco, a major industry manufacturer and supplier. He's often called to work with Lesco's legal department when a claim arises from a worker injured using power equipment, a power mower usually.

These injuries can be avoided, says Sisley, practically all of them.

"We see switches that are disconnected or inoperable," says Sisley. Sometimes an operator removes a discharge chute. Operators sometimes bypass or ignore safety features on power equipment because:

- a) they're in too much of a hurry,
- b) they haven't been properly trained to run the equipment, or to recognize the consequences of their actions,
- c) they're allowed to—probably the greatest of the three sins.

"That person who tapes the handles down (disabling the mower's operator presence control system) is not looking at a huge time savings. He's probably just looking at a few seconds," says Sisley.

"There are all kinds of ways to defeat the safety features on a professional mower if an operator wants to take the time and effort to do it," he adds.

But, the real question is why?

Gary Hansen insists that allowing employees to use power equipment in an unsafe manner is just bad business. And, that's apart from any lawsuits or claims arising from accidents.

their individual efforts, and their experience.

"For instance, getting in a group rating can save them 70 percent of workers comp premiums. That's money they can use or put on their bottom line right now.

"But, if they've had bad experiences (worker injuries and claims) over the past four years, they can be penalty rated. Workers compensation is going to charge them a high premium," says Hansen whose firm advises other companies and associations on safety issues. "That's why one person can be paying \$5,000 a year and somebody else in the same business can be paying \$20,000 for basically the same coverage."

## **The right thing**

There's a humanitarian reason for protecting your workers, adds Kate Goewey, corporate safety director for W.A. Natorp Co., Cincinnati.

"Imagine that someone that you care about personally, perhaps a son or a daughter, will be doing a task, or using a specific piece of equipment. Are you uneasy?" she asks. "If you are, don't let your employees do it either." W.A. Natorp, like most successful green industry operations, has a working safety program. The emphasis here is on "working".

"Every person who becomes an employee goes through a safety orientation," says Goewey. "Each new employee gets a company safety manual. But, we don't just tell the employee to take the manual home and read it, we go over it with them word for word. This takes 45 to 60 minutes.

"This lets employees know up front that we're serious about safety."

Each division of W. A. Natorp meets regularly to discuss safety issues—tree and



**Lesco's Bill Sisley says today's mowing equipment is engineered for safety, but equipment operators still need training.**

## **It's bad business**

"Safety makes good financial sense," says Hansen with American Safety and Health Management Consultants, Inc., Canal Fulton, Ohio. "Many people don't realize that until you sit down with them and go through it. They have a misconception that there is an insurance policy out there that covers them. What they don't realize is that that insurance policy is controlled by

landscape crews weekly, and nursery and garden store employees twice a month.

"We encourage discussions and questions. The topics are geared to the work and the conditions at the time," says Goewey. "Many times we present a problem and ask for solutions. Our people have come up with some fantastic ideas that turned out to be simple to implement. They know the work and its hazards best."

#### No compromises

Safety expert Hansen says green industry organizations should insist that employees follow safety rules 100 percent of the time.

"The function of safety training is to get employees to do a task or operate a piece of machinery the right way consistently, no matter what," he says. "There always has to be follow-up by management, correction by management. When it comes to safety there can be no deviations, no excuses."

As for safety training? Keep it simple, make it applicable to the type of work you're doing. And do it regularly.

"It can be basic. It can be fairly easy," says Hansen, "but it has to be a formal part of your mission, like your corporate mission. It makes sense. Isn't one of your missions to protect your most vital assets? Your employees? Your equipment? Your property? Your sales or production capabilities? Your company's good name?"

Corey Eastwood's golf course maintenance crew meets every other Monday to review safety issues. The meetings last about 15-30 minutes each.

"Sometimes we review safety apparel, and we have general discussions too," says Eastwood. "Often we discuss equipment. We want to make sure all of our equipment is operating properly. About once a year we go over every piece of equipment. We get the manuals, we involve the mechanics and we review all the safety features of the equipment."

Eastwood's 18-member crew at the Stockdale Coun-

try Club, Bakersfield, CA, is proud of not having a lost-time accident in three years.

#### A safety culture

"At the Morrell Group we look at safety as being, not just a program, but a part of our everyday operation," adds George Morrell, owner of the Atlanta-based landscape company. That's one reason why safety training begins immediately for new hires during their initial 1½-2 day orientation programs. "Each step along the way we dis-



▲ An operator's hands must be at the controls for modern machines to keep operating.

▼ Long pants and work boots show that this operator is dressed for a day's work.



cuss safety with them," says Morrell

The 20-year landscape veteran knows that safety goes beyond manuals, videos and bi-weekly worker meetings. It includes having first aid kits and fire extinguishers on all company trucks. Of equipping employees with proper protective gear, including, in the Morrell Group's case, bright orange company shirts. Of insisting that employees report all accidents, then reviewing why they happened.

The Morrell Group's safety committee meets regularly and provides managers with four or five suggestions to pass on to front-line workers. The company also has a "Safety Bucks" program that rewards accident-free workers with a little extra compensation.

Even if you have a strong program, you'll probably have to revise and update it to meet changing conditions.

"Every year we get our employees more involved with the idea of safety, and we're asking them to tell us what topics they need," says Sandy French, Human Resource/Safety Manager for Hillenmeyer Nursery, Lexington, KY. "We want them to actually participate in the demonstrations. This year we want to be out in the

nursery or in the shop. We realize that these people have chosen to work outdoors so it's hard for them to always sit inside and listen to me talk."

Even so, French insists that Hillenmeyer employees hear the most important safety instructions over and over.

"They might be sick of hearing about some of this material, but we all learn by repetition. Eventually all of us must realize how important this is," says French. □



George Morrell, The Morrell Group, Atlanta: "Safety should be a part of everything you do."