

# Irrigation faces move to conservation

*New standards for design and installation, water audits, even certification in some locations will challenge those who provide irrigation products and services.*

By BRUCE SHANK

**L**andscapes are a vital part of everyday community life and, as such, depend more on irrigation for proper care. The more governmental agencies get involved in public landscapes, the more other agencies, such as water districts, become involved. As standards improve, the need for irrigation grows.

While many of the issues involved with irrigation are not regulatory, they will have impact on the future of landscape management, especially in high-end projects located in both the North and the South.

## Design weaknesses

The primary weakness of irrigation systems is their design, not the performance of individual irrigation components. A recent study in San Antonio, TX, revealed that water conservation efforts were hampered most by poor irrigation system design. Current technology to maximize irrigation distribution uniformity and to cut waste is not being used properly. The problem centers around older systems and those installed by do-it-yourselfers.

## Conservation inconsistencies

States and counties vary in their approach to conservation. The Irvine approach is to use a tiered water rate structure based on metering and determining baseline water needs for landscapes. Once water use exceeds the baseline, prices skyrocket. The Las Vegas approach is to restrict the percentage of turfgrass used in landscapes. The Albuquerque approach is to assign trained water specialists with enforcement powers; so called "water police." It is a tougher version of the Palm Springs

approach, where agency personnel perform audits of large irrigation systems to gauge performance.

More states are implementing irrigation contractor certification programs that require training and testing. Government is getting involved in irrigation at a rapid pace across the country as growth, water infrastructure and water supply for the next century become serious issues.

Every year, irrigation becomes harder for landscape contractors to ignore. When you consider that the cost of an irrigation system averages 23% of the cost of a landscape installation, irrigation deserves the attention of contractors from coast to coast.

The only way a landscape contractor can be certain that his or her installation survives for one year or 50 years is with irrigation. High temperature records were set every month of 1998, while droughts tested water supplies in the Carolinas, Texas, Nevada and Massachusetts. Betting on weather over irrigation is no longer wise, when you consider the average customer's investment in real estate and landscaping.

Weather and pests are the two most serious threats to landscape plants. The pest control industry offers a significant arsenal to provide both preventative and curative management of diseases and pests. Irrigation, on the other hand, requires an infrastructure to supply needed moisture when droughts hit. Both quality and productivity of plants are significantly improved when periods of insufficient soil moisture are eliminated. **LM**

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