



Winning

at water politics

How can a campaign to save salmon threaten landscape maintenance practices in the Pacific Northwest? Water use disputes have some surprising effects on our industry.

By MIKE PERRAULT/
Associate Editor

What do salmon have to do with chemical lawn and landscape care? Plenty, claim officials in the Pacific Northwest, who are considering banning the insecticide diazinon. You've got to be kidding, say landscape company owners, who believe they're being blindsided. When it comes to water, the green industry never knows when or where the next controversy will erupt.

But after being pointed to as "the bad guys" in almost every local or regional water flap, lawn and landscape pros are starting to get their act together — even when the controversy seems as unlikely as one focusing on the depleted salmon population in Oregon and Washington states.

The issue surfaced when the U.S. Geological Survey cited pesticides, including diazinon, as contributing to the salmon's decline. It pointed to urban use of pesticides and fertilizers as possible causes, prompting King County officials to consider a diazinon ban.



Water use and other environmental issues don't have to inhibit professional landscape maintenance practices.

But Heather Hansen, a spokesperson for Washington Friends of Farms and Forests, an organization representing landscapers, urban applicators and other pesticide users, claims the county's efforts to tie salmon declines to diazinon and other pesticides are not based on scientific evidence. She has confronted city and county officials before about unfounded pollution claims.

Regs under discussion

What is certain is that salmon protection is an issue that can galvanize environmental groups to push for more hard-line regulations, landscape professionals concede. After Washington's governor launched a "Save the Salmon" campaign, Seattle ran a full-page newspaper ad outlining five ways to protect salmon, including elimi-

nating lawn chemicals. Such groups as People for Puget Sound, the Washington Toxics Coalition and the Rainier Audubon Society are demanding the city discontinue pesticide use by Jan. 1, 2002.

Environmentalists have cast a wider net, but they're being challenged head-on. A proposal by one group in King County, WA, to "canopy the county with trees and get rid of turf" was shelved after the Washington Association of Landscape Professionals (WALP) got involved and pointed out many practical and agronomic pitfalls of the plan, says Jeffrey Ricks, WALP president-elect and operator of Horticulture Plus Inc., Vancouver, WA.

Seattle and King County officials see the pilot program as one more step in the collaborative effort to address environmental concerns. "I applaud WALP for being bold enough to take this step," says Carl Woestwin, landscape programs project manager for Seattle Public Utilities.

That cooperation has not come painlessly, notes Annette Frahm, communications planner for King County Department of Natural Resources. She recalls the first meeting in which some landscape industry representatives were nothing short of "hostile." But, she adds, initial talks with other industries weren't any different.

"When we first met with dentists, they didn't want to talk about mercury being a hazardous waste," she says. "That's nothing new to us."

"Some of it has been very positive and cordial, and some of it has been more difficult," adds Carl Woestwin of Seattle Public Utilities.

Shedding "us vs. them"

The need for landscape professionals to have a voice in the Puget Sound area may be more important than ever. "The fish issue is bigger than the Spotted White Owl issue," says Peter Dervin, executive director of the WALP. "Every part of this region is affected by water and salmon migration. They're talking about tearing out dams on the Columbia River. That's how big of an issue this is."

The potential threat to salmon from chemicals leaching into tributaries has cast more light on water quality, and Washington's population growth adds another dimension as officials scrutinize everything from water quality to solid waste systems.

For the landscape industry, it has raised new concerns about grass clippings and waste. "The questions have become, 'Where do we go with this stuff, where are we going to dump it?'"

Dervin says.

The city and county have focused on irrigation conservation, grass clippings, recycling and proper use of fertilizer, pesticides and other chemicals. "Their programs have been targeted to the residential customer, the person who pays the utility bill," Dervin says. "Over the last year or two, they've been trying to get the landscape industry involved."

It can only help us

"There has always been this *us vs. them* mentality," says Brian Skinner, president of Seattle-based Skinner Landscape Service Inc. "We have to get away from that kind of thinking." That's why he is

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Controversy over the decline of local salmon like those spawning here erupted into a very public water quality flap, which soon affected landscape and lawn care operations.

Former foes solve water woes

Jeffrey Ricks isn't all wet when he talks of serious drought in usually soggy Seattle. "It's hard to think of a drought right now when I'm almost drowning," quips Ricks, president of Horticulture Plus Inc., Vancouver, WA. Yet Seattle's drought in the early 1990s was no laughing matter. It pitted green industry professionals against Seattle Public Utilities and King County, as water availability dropped.

"It was a dust bowl around here, devastating to the industry," recalls Brian Skinner, president of Seattle-based Skinner Landscape Service Inc.

City and county officials charged that lawns and plants were sucking the water supply dry, then they ordered spigots shut off. Green industry professionals claimed the city had mismanaged its water supply. Animosity built, says Peter Dervin, executive director of the Washington Association of Landscape Professionals (WALP). "The industry got up in arms and said, 'How can you do this to us?'"

Smoking the peace pipe

But in the eight years since the confrontation, the two camps have overcome significant hurdles to collaborate on voluntary, proactive environmental initiatives aimed at ensuring water availability and quality. A search for solutions began with the formation of a Green Industry Council and continued in cooperative efforts to develop a natural lawn care program and a water contingency plan.

Now, there's a pilot program in the works to educate and test certified landscape technicians about environmental stewardship. Some say it's a model program; others in the industry complain it gives local government too much say in how the industry's own professionals teach and employ management strategies.

Landscape professionals in Washington aren't alone. Other industry associations and firms nationwide are eyeing cooperative environmental initiatives, seeking out decision-making or advisory roles and entering into voluntary partnerships. Programs include:

► **Water Use Summit** — This ambitious but largely behind-the-scenes effort to establish a dialogue between nationwide water users and controllers of water is spearheaded by the Irrigation Association. "Our feeling is irrigation (including agriculture) is the biggest user of water, but we don't control the water," says Tom Kimmell, IA's executive director.

"We wanted to get with the people who treat and deliver water to ensure we're on the same page. Our fear was that everybody would end up protecting their own turf."

Two meetings (a third is scheduled for September) have included the Associated Landscape Contractors Association and more than a dozen heavy hitters in the water industry.

► **Pairing with EPA** — Jonathan Boyar, Watch All Inc.'s marketing director, sought out the EPA's Partners for Change program to help define environmentally friendly approaches to its customers. Watch All Inc., Weymouth, MA, provides lawn care, IPM and structural damage repair. Boyar saw the EPA program as an opportunity to showcase its environmental endeavors, from its "Good, Bugs, Bad Bugs" school seminars to innovative pest control and recycling efforts.

► **Water-Wise Council** — After a public utility in Georgia proposed shutting off water to landscapers during a drought, the Georgia Green Industry Association secured a place for members on the Georgia Water Wise Council. Now they sit alongside university faculty, state EPA officials and utility personnel to manage water issues.

► **Active participation** — Professional Lawn Care Association of America has partnered with the EPA's Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program to improve water quality education, and a Green Industry Advisory Committee in Florida now meets monthly with the Southwest Florida Management District, to oversee water use and regulate irrigation scheduling in 16 counties.

Partner or perish

When a regional water board in Reno, NV, tried to ban turf from all new commer-

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WALP's certified landscape technician maintenance core chairman. He believes landscape professionals need to educate themselves, and the pilot program includes an important environmental aspect in the education process.

Skinner believes the program's proposed environmentally friendly maintenance strategies can benefit individual landscape companies. "If we use proper techniques, we can use less product," he says. "No one's saying you can't use fertilizers. They're saying let's get soil tests, let's find out what we need instead of dumping fertilizer on the turf and having 40% or 50% of it wash away into the water table."

Whether it's fertilizer application or water use, Dervin says the issues aren't going away. "If we don't address those issues in a proactive manner, we're going to be a negative target for everybody wanting to regulate this stuff. If we look at it as a negative — as the government imposing regulations on us again — that's just sour grapes. If we look at it as a business opportunity, then we have options. Some clients are willing to pay for their landscape companies to be environmentally friendly." **LM**

cial landscape installations two years ago, the Nevada Landscape Association responded quickly. It hired lawyers, sought the expertise of well-known turf professor James Beard, Ph.D., worked out a conservation plan and arranged monthly meetings so landscape professionals could have a say about water availability and quality issues.

In another case, ALCA sent nine letters to the Greensboro (NC) City Council, prompting officials to modify water restriction ordinances on behalf of landscape professionals.

Legislation to protect watersheds, rivers and aquifers will only get more intense as competition for water increases, predicts Peter Gleick, Ph.D., president of the Pacific Institute and expert on global water policy. The changing dynamics will lead to what Gleick calls a "Blue Revolution." □