

# Drought —

## prepare a plan

### Colorado's worst drought in decades taught its Green Industry valuable lessons

BY RON HALL / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**S** muddy clouds tumbled onto Colorado's Front Range and dumped four feet of snow on Denver and its surrounding area this past March 17. The storm crippled the region for several days but gave landscape and lawn service operators reason to smile again — if only cautiously.

The Green Industry there, suffering through the region's worst drought in 50 years, blessed the moisture and prayed that it signaled the beginning of the end to a bewildering array of water restrictions stunting their operations. So far it hasn't.

"Mother Nature is finally starting to take very good care of us, but the water districts are

still beating the @#%X! out of us," says Eric Schultz of Schultz Industries, Golden, CO. That, in fact, was the message he recently delivered to members of the Denver Water Board. The outdoor water use restrictions had already caused his firm to lay off 30 workers. The restrictions were damaging the regional economy, affecting over one million residents. They limited outdoor watering to a maximum of eight irrigation zones per property, 15 minutes per zone and just twice weekly.

#### Patchwork of regs

Denver has the most clout in water use laws on the Front Range. But there are at least 50

other water authorities in the region, and almost as many with different watering regulations. Property owner confusion over outdoor water use there is widespread. The harm it has done to the Green Industry has been significant.

"We had people who lived across the street from each other, and one homeowner could water every day of the week and the other could only water two days a week for two hours," says John Gibson of Swingle Tree & Lawn Care, Denver.

A wet and cool spring is helping the region recover, but authorities remain cautious

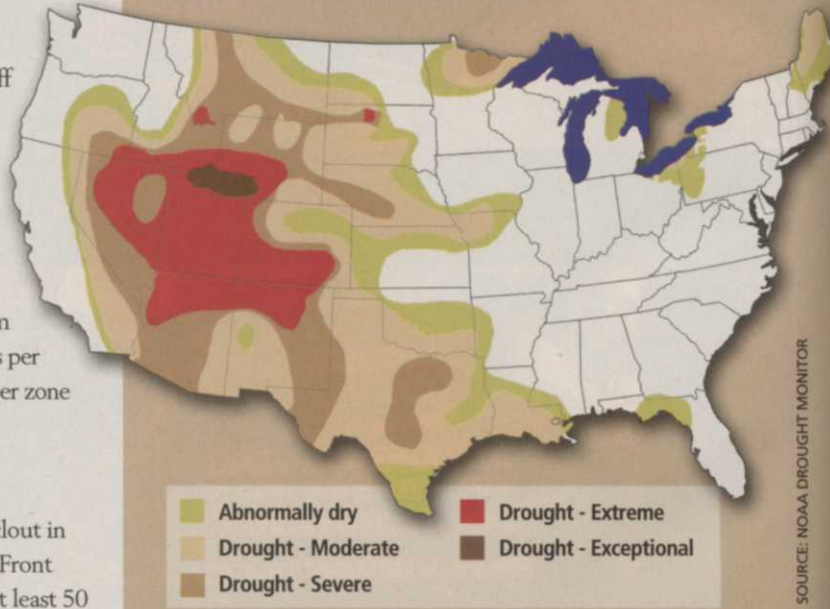
about relaxing watering restrictions, at least until the region's reservoirs are back to pre-drought levels.

"I was more concerned about the drought in January and February of this year than I am now," admits David Tollefson of the Urban Farmer, Inc., Thornton, CO. He says that his firm's construction business took a 10% hit from the double whammy of drought and stagnant economy, but maintenance operations picked up. "Now it's a matter of getting in front of customers and knocking on doors," he says.

Tollefson and most other

*continued on page 48*

### U.S. DROUGHT MONITOR



SOURCE: NOAA DROUGHT MONITOR

# 10 profit-saving drought-response strategies

Which of the 10 strategies do you feel are most important in planning for the next drought in your market area?

- 1. Step up customer education and communication.** Provide clients with authoritative and easy-to-understand literature concerning the sound basis for your programs. Expect to do a lot more customer handholding. If you do it right, you'll have clients for life.
- 2. Stress the value of clients' landscapes, and how your services can protect their landscape investments.** The money spent on maintenance is money well spent compared to the cost of renovating or re-establishing a landscape.
- 3. Strengthen your service**

capabilities, and especially your irrigation management/maintenance/repair expertise. Customers need these services most when water districts mandate substantial cutbacks in outdoor water use.

- 4. Cite the economic importance of your industry to your region.** Numbers matter when it comes to political decisions, especially those preceded by dollar signs. If your state or regional association hasn't developed or updated a study showing the economic clout of your industry, maybe it's time to start considering one.
- 5. Support the efforts of your local and/or regional professional association.** There's strength in numbers, and

when watering restrictions hit they generally affect all segments of the Green Industry.

- 6. Involve yourself in your region's water decision-making process.** Obviously, it's better to do this before a drought emergency arises. You need to be heard before.
- 7. Improve your operation's technical skills in regard to "water wise" landscape design and installation.** Does your staff include personnel knowledgeable about installing drip irrigation and/or selecting/using native plants?
- 8. Promote add-on services that help clients maintain their landscapes in spite of a scarcity of water.** These may include a tanker-truck water-

ing service for their trees and shrubs, tree ring mulching, the use of technology such as surfactants to improve irrigation efficiency, to name a few.

- 9. Promote, sell and provide landscape renovation and restoration.** Have you checked on the availability and price of turfseed, other plant material and chemicals that will be required to repair properties?
- 10. Budget smartly and seek efficiencies.** Some companies that we interviewed on the Front Range developed two budgets going into this season — one reflecting growth they would normally expect, the other a "worst case" scenario. Regardless of the course of the water restrictions, they scrutinized their operations for efficiencies.

*continued from page 46*  
landscape and lawn service companies stepped up customer education efforts as the drought settled in.

"We started seeing the

drought restrictions come out in June last year, and we mailed out thousands of pieces to customers and their neighbors telling them what to expect from the drought and

how it would impact their services with us," says Gibson at Swingle.

"We kept telling people not to abandon sound science when it comes to taking care of their landscapes," Gibson adds. "Maintaining a property is a lot less expensive than resodding."

Companies coming out of the drought in the best shape have kept in close contact with clients and, in many cases, offered additional or alternative service options. They've also stepped up client education.

"We've done a better job of promoting landscaping's value and lifestyle values, and it's paying off," adds Eric Schultz.

While many landscapers and lawn service companies there feel that they've turned the corner on the drought, they don't minimize its economic impact.

Sharon Harris, the Executive Director of Greenco, a coalition of regional Green Industry associations, says a recent Colorado State University survey pegged the loss to the region's growers and landscapers at \$200 million from the end of 2001 to the end of 2002. This is taking into account a slump in the region's technology sector, too. Even so, she says, "the water restrictions that were put in place have had a huge impact." **LM**

## Jrco Heavy-duty Attachments For Commercial Mowers

### Blower Buggy Carrier

- Carrier for walk-behind blowers
- Low profile
- Easy maneuverability



Call for dealer 800.966.8442 [www.jrcoinc.com](http://www.jrcoinc.com)

Circle 135