



The SSI will change our industry

The Sustainable Sites Initiative (SSI) holds the potential to profoundly impact our professional landscaping industry. That's whether we install or maintain landscapes. That's whether the primary focus of our business operations is the greenery or hardscape side of the business.

The SSI is a voluntary rating system for the design, construction and maintenance of "sustainable" sites and landscapes. The quotation marks are mine. Obviously, the outdoor environments we install and maintain — and especially those that involve greenery — don't maintain or regenerate themselves. They're acceptable to our clients only through our efforts.

Accepting that, the goal of the SSI is to make practically the entire spectrum of landscapes affected by human activity more in tune with natural processes in terms of energy, water and materials use. The Initiative also seeks to improve and restore damaged landscapes and natural systems. Its purpose is laid out in its recently released, 233-page "*Guidelines and Performance Benchmarks 2009*."

The SSI has the support of industry groups, such as the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) and the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), one of the partners, along with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and the U.S. Botanic Garden, in the interdisciplinary effort.

The LEED impact

Because the scope of the Initiative is so broad, once it becomes part of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) just about every aspect of our industry is likely to be affected.

Being part of LEED is a big deal for the SSI. That will almost guarantee its rapid spread as evi-

denced by the incredible adoption of LEED. Since its founding in 1998 by the U.S. Green Building Council, LEED now numbers more than 14,000 projects in at least 30 countries.

Getting our grades

LEED primarily focuses, of course, on providing standards for environmentally sustainable building construction — commercial, governmental, schools and residential. Critics (what few there are) have mostly focused on the portion of its rating system dealing with the properties that surround buildings, which the SSI seeks to address. It will essentially grade our industry's efforts in five major areas:

1. human health and well-being,
2. soils,
3. vegetation,
4. hydrology and
5. materials.

The SSI rating system works on a 250-credit scale. These credits can apply to projects ranging from home landscapes to commercial properties to public parks and beyond. Again, the scope of the Initiative is audacious.

Full SSI implementation as part of LEED is still some months away, but the positive buzz in the media and blogosphere regarding the rating system has been building since the unveiling of the new guidelines at this fall's ASLA Conference.

As you read this the SSI is collecting case studies, which will become part of the growing body of information supporting the program gathered these past five years.

Yes, participating in the Initiative will be "voluntary," but most of us realize soft policy eventually becomes hard policy. Get ready for it.

Don't be among those landscape pros who wake up one morning and find out that our industry has fundamentally shifted, and they're the only ones still offering services under the old models.

Stay on top of SSI. Visit www.sustainablesites.org so you're ready for what's coming.