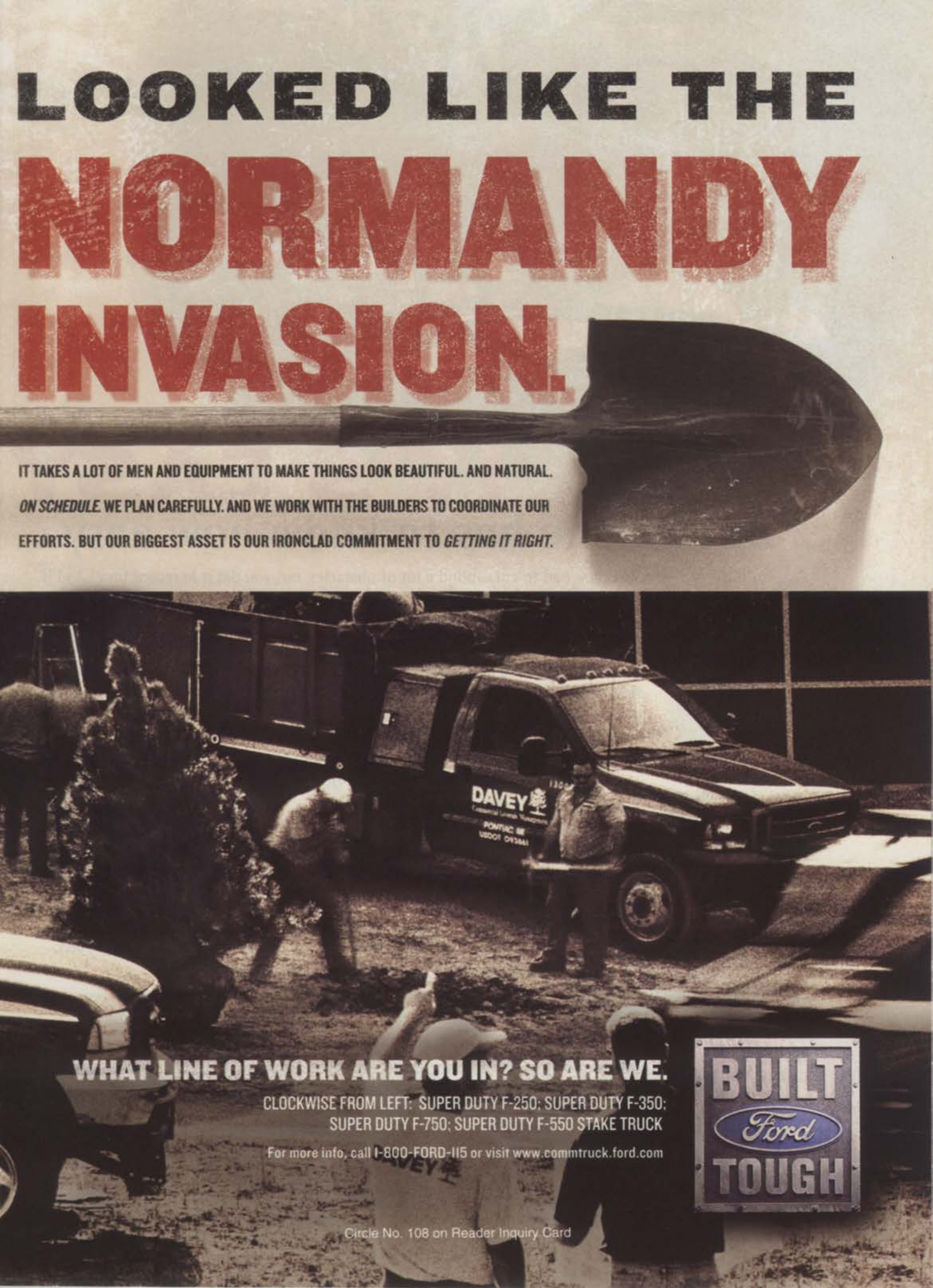
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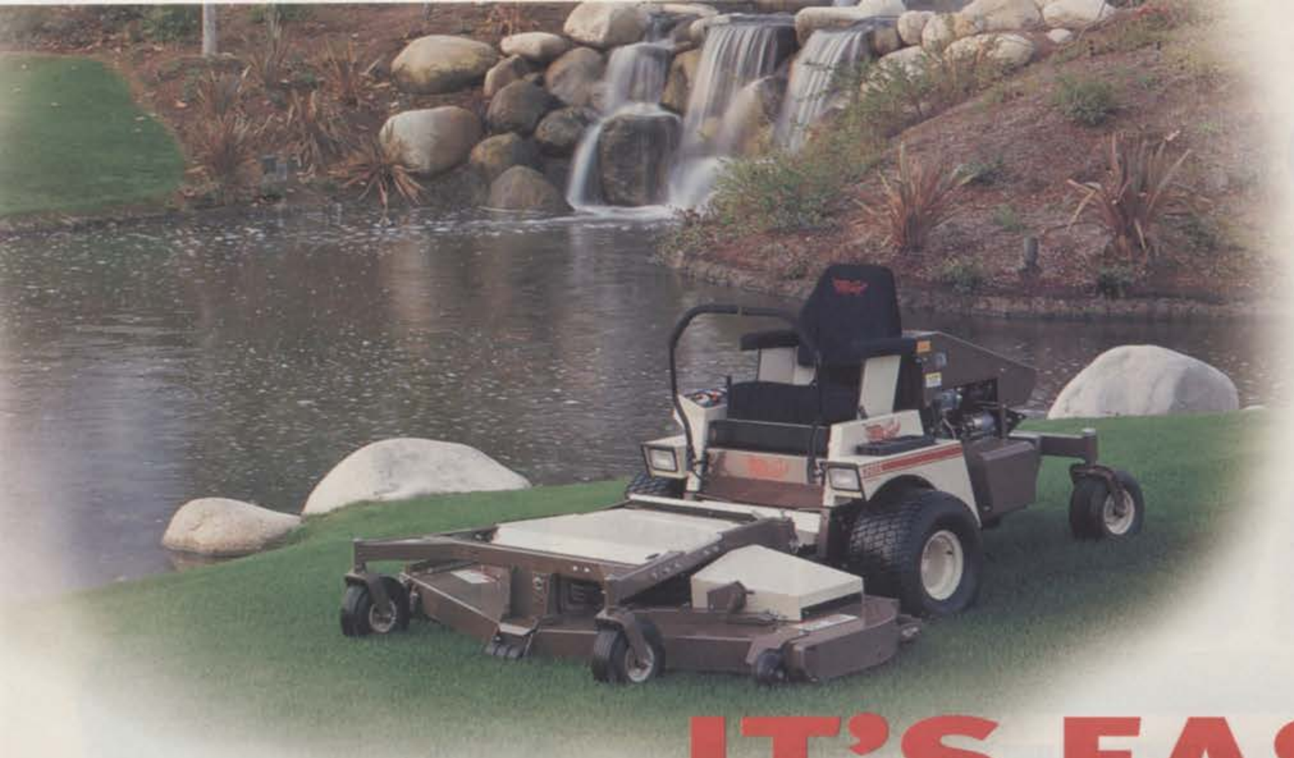

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green side up

RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

Raise your prices for 2001

If you're in the lawn fertilization business, it's gut-check time. Screw up your courage and raise your prices this approaching season. If, for competitive reasons, you can't, or if you've already signed up a lot of customers at last season's prices, you may have to revise your 2001 profit forecast . . . downward.

The cost of caring for your customers' lawns and commercial properties is going to rise this year, maybe significantly. The reason is unexpectedly high energy costs.

The most obvious result of this is the higher price we pay for gasoline and diesel fuel, an extra financial burden for any service delivery business such as ours.

But did you know that high energy costs, particularly skyrocketing natural gas prices, are driving up the cost of producing nitrogen fertilizers, too?

In fact, about 4% of total U.S. gas production is used to produce ammonia, says The Fertilizer Institute, a trade organization based in Washington D.C. The ammonia is processed further to make urea, the prime ingredient in most of our turfgrass fertilizers.

The scope of the problem

The Fertilizer Institute says that it takes 33.5 million BTUs of natural gas to produce one ton of ammonia. In 1999, the U.S. fertilizer industry used 580 trillion BTUs of natural gas to make 17.34 million tons of ammonia. Over 80% of this ammonia went into fertilizer production.

The start of year 2000 saw the price of natural gas at \$2.50 per million BTUs. At that figure, it cost just over \$100 to make a ton of ammonia. This year, when the price of natural gas rose to \$6 per million BTUs, it pushed the cost of production of a ton of ammonia to \$229. The price of natural gas continues climbing and is expected to remain high — at least into summer.

With natural gas so expensive, several U.S. urea producers have closed their doors, and others have curtailed production. They're finding it difficult to compete with foreign producers of urea who are paying much less for energy.

This raises the possibility that some types of turf fertilizer may be in short supply this spring. Variables in this picture include U.S. agriculture's demand for nitrogen fertilizer this spring, and the availability and price of foreign-produced urea.

"We've already seen price increases in urea," says Bill Davis, general manager of Tyler Enterprises of Elwood, a major turf fertilizer supplier headquartered near Chicago. "The biggest shock for me is the amount of the jump."

How high will it go?

How much more will fertilizer cost this year?

"I think everybody is really stumped on this one," adds Richard D. Harrell of NU-GRO Technologies, Inc., Grand Rapids, MI. "We do know that the prices are going to go up, but we really don't know by how much."

"I'd hate to put a number on it because nobody really knows," says Bill Hubbell, Vice President of Service Centers for LESCO. "Actually, the cost has been creeping up all year. It wasn't so noticeable because it (the 2000 season) was a soft-demand year for fertilizer. We had plenty of rain in the North and there was a drought in the South."

Some of you have already taken advantage of "early order" opportunities offered by suppliers. Those of you still needing to buy fertilizer for this spring should check with your supplier about prices and availability.

Even if fertilizer prices rise significantly this spring, there's no reason to panic. Most lawn care companies spend less than 15% of their budgets on fertilizer and pesticides..

You shouldn't absorb these higher costs, though. They're a legitimate reason to raise prices.

Contact Ron at 440/891-2636 or e-mail at rhall@advanstar.com

Those of you still needing to buy fertilizer for this spring should check with your supplier about prices and availability.

BOB SMART / GUEST COLUMNIST

"By including full-time employees in the company's financial rewards, we keep 'team members' up to date on our budgetary goals and build a sense of teamwork."

Share your success with employees

My partner, Bruce Stone, and I think it's good business to share our landscape company's success with our employees. One of the ways we do this is through profit sharing.

By including full-time employees in the company's financial rewards, we keep "team members" up to date on our budgetary goals and builds a sense of teamwork.

Since co-founding Yard Smart, Inc., Olmsted Falls, OH, almost 15 years ago, we have guided our company on a course of healthy, manageable growth, offering landscape maintenance, design/build and snow removal. Our company employs 20 to 25 workers during peak season, and we attribute much of our operation's success to them.

Our idea

I got the idea for my company's profit sharing program from an article by Green Industry consultant Charles Vander Kooi. I borrowed many of his suggestions and added a few wrinkles of my own to make the program work for our company.

Our profit sharing program kicks in when (and only when) our gross profit exceeds 40%. Any percentage over this figure is shared 50/50 with the company and eligible employees. Calculations for the program are done every six months.

There are two opportunities each year for employees to receive bonuses. Only full-time employees are eligible for profit sharing, and each employee's share of the bonus is dependent upon his or her contribution to the company's total success. Each eligible employee is evaluated twice a year by a committee comprised of me, my partner and four other employees. The results are posted for everyone to see.

The ratings game

The committee rates each employee on a scale of 1 to 10 in seven different categories. They are:

Attitude/cooperation: Get along with fellow workers and customers. Willingness to take on tasks. Positive or negative attitude.

Equipment care: Clean, organized, maintained, abusive, neglectful.

Paperwork: Thorough, correct, timely, detailed, complete, clean, legible.

Quality/attention to detail: Lost time, repetition, correcting mistakes, customer satisfaction.

Safety: Personal protection equipment, awareness of surroundings, accidents, follow procedures, increased costs.

Uniform/grooming: Clean, proper clothing, personal protection equipment.

Commitment: Dedication, vision, excellence, obligation, performance and achievement, in charge, trustworthy.

Each evaluator fills out a sheet for each eligible employee with a rating (1 to 10) for each category. The points are totaled at the bottom of each sheet and all seven evaluations' results are added to achieve the total number of bonus points for each eligible employee. The total bonus points for each employee are then divided by the number of evaluators, producing an average rating.

Meanwhile, all the ratings are added together to get the "total company points." This number is then divided into the amount of money allocated for profit sharing to arrive at a dollar amount per point.

For example, assume that our company exceeded its gross profit prediction for one reporting period by $10,000. This means that eligible full-time employees would share $5,000 (50%), with the other $5,000 (50%) going to the company.

For discussion's sake, let's also assume that employee John Doe received 50 points (the average of the six evaluations), his three brothers Jack, Mack and Joe Doe received 40 points each and his cousins Moe and Manny Doe received 35 points.

The total company points in this example would be 240 — John's 50, the brothers' combined total of 120 and the cousins' combined total of 70. Divide the 240 points into $5,000 to get a value of $20.83 per point. This number is then multiplied with the average point totals of each employee to determine the amount of profit sharing each will receive. In this example, John Doe would receive $1,041.50 and the cousins would receive $729.05 each.

Attendance counts, too

But we take the process one step further. We also figure attendance into the equation — a total of 132 workdays during the reporting period.

In our example, John Doe's profit sharing was $1,041.50. But John missed five workdays during that period. So we divide the 132 work days into the $1,041.50 figure to determine a "dollar value per day" — in this example, $7.89. His profit sharing is then reduced by $39.45 (5 x $7.89), and his profit sharing check drops to $1,002.05 ($1,041.50 minus $39.45).

This is the formula that our company has adapted to fit its system, and it has turned our employees into happier, more productive people.

Bob Smart is co-owner of Yard Smart, a full-service landscape company located in Olmsted Falls, OH. He can be reached at 440/253-9273.

industry almanac

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Toro acquires Goossen

BLOOMINGTON, MN — The Toro Company (NYSE: TTC) announced on Dec. 7, 2000 that it was purchasing Goossen Industries, Inc., which makes sweepers, vacuums, blowers, mulchers, chipper/shredders and bale choppers.

"This purchase will expand Toro's existing product lines for the debris management portion of our landscape and grounds maintenance business," said Kendrick B. Melrose, chairman and chief executive officer of Toro.

Another crucial benefit, he said, is that the Goossen facility of 64,000 sq. ft. in Beatrice, NB, is located adjacent to Toro-owned Exmark Manufacturing and allows Exmark to continue growing and expanding its production. Goossen's 55 employees will join Exmark.

Scotts Company businesses unite

MARYSVILLE, OH — The Scotts Company united its professional businesses in America and Europe as a Global Professional Business Group. The company cited the growth of its international professional business, synergies between product lines and an opportunity to focus marketing efforts on global brands as key factors in their decision. The new group is headquartered in Waardenburg, the Netherlands.

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[CLIPPINGS]

Texas bans morning commercial equipment use

BY JASON STAHL

HOUSTON, TX — The Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) voted on Dec. 6 to ban commercial landscape contractors in the Houston/Galveston, TX area from using gasoline-powered lawn and garden equipment in the morning.

The ban will affect five counties in the ozone non-attainment area from April 1 through October 31, beginning April 1, 2005, from 6 a.m. until noon.

Bill Guerry, legal counsel for the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), said that despite the ban, all hope is not lost. "There is a conditional exemption the TNRCC is fleshing out right now that commercial operators can qualify for if they commit to alternative emissions reduction plans," Guerry says. "Presumably, this exemption would be based on commercial operators changing something in their activity that would result in reduced emissions."

Time, Guerry says, is also on the side of commercial operators, given that the ban won't start until 2005. "The TNRCC adopted a lot of rules under an abbreviated time frame, so they are anticipating talk with a lot of industries and figuring out ways to accomplish everyone's goals."

Guerry says he considered it a partial victory that OPEI got homeowners excluded from the ban, and that it had gotten the number of counties included in the ban reduced from eight to five. Still, the ban on commercial operators is a concern because the outcome of the TNRCC's decision is unclear.

"The jury's still out," Guerry says.

"Texas may realize that the emissions reductions they're getting don't merit this level of effort. The numbers they're using don't reflect the numbers they'll get from clean air federally compliant products."

A good deal?

Overall, Eddy Edmondson, president/CEO of the Texas Nursery & Landscape Association (TNLA), who has been involved with the ban ever since it was first proposed last August, says the deal was as good as could have been expected.

"From the start, we submitted comments and arranged for two personal visits with each commissioner on the TNRCC, and they were very open to our

continued on page 19

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continued from page 16

suggestions," Edmondson says. "The first proposal didn't offer an alternative option, so that was our first hill to climb."

And Edmondson believes that obstacle was overcome now that an emissions reduction plan is in the works that could provide exemptions. "We have until 2002 to come up with the plan, but in our mind we start working on it now," says Marilyn Good, communications officer for TNLA. "The TNRCC assured us that the industry and other stakeholders would be involved in developing this plan."

"The jury's still out: Texas may realize that the emissions reductions they're getting don't merit this level of effort. The numbers they're using don't reflect the numbers they'll get from clean air federally compliant products."

— Bill Guerry, OPEI legal counsel

Still some uncertainty

Even though there's the promise of a conditional exemption, local landscape contractors can't help but take a negative view of the ban.

"It's going to hurt a lot of people down here business-wise," says Randy Fuller, owner of Yardmasters, Inc., Houston, TX. "Hopefully, they'll be able to work something out that would enable us to continue working. If not, we might have to switch to propane power. Most of the equipment out there is regulated to California standards, so I don't know how much stricter they can get."

"It's going to drastically increase the price of our services," Fuller added. "We'll need twice as much equipment and more employees. And I wonder who's going to enforce it? The police don't enforce some laws that are already on the book. I think the TNRCC is going to be overwhelmed in that department."

Learning on the fly

Web course gives busy industry pros education in a snap

BY JASON STAHL

Just think: you could chew gum or thumb your nose at the professor and he or she would never know.

It's doubtful that Web-based courses were conceived for those reasons, but they have changed the face of education. More important, they have made it easier for Green Industry professionals to expand their knowledge.

Take the University of Maryland's Hort 400 course, a Web-based course on water and nutrient management planning for the nursery and greenhouse industry. The idea came from the Water Quality Act of 1998, which required all nurseries and greenhouses have nutrient management plans. Faculty members from Maryland's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources decided the course should be offered on the Web since professionals from all over the U.S. would need training.

Ready for action

The course debuted in the fall of 1999, with teams of at least one graduate or undergraduate student, industry professional and Extension educator exchanging ideas and information on an online forum led by instructors.

Each team developed a nutrient management plan featuring management strategies designed to reduce high-risk practices that lead to excessive nitrogen and phosphorus runoff.

The program allowed industry professionals to educate themselves simply by turning on their computers in the comfort of their own homes. Participants met face-to-face every three weeks for more interaction.

Dr. John Lea-Cox, Department of Natural Resource Sciences and Landscape Architecture, feels that web-cameras could eventually replace the face-to-face meeting while still providing a personal touch.

"I think the Web is the future of Extension services," Lea-Cox says. "It's reaching out to people faster, cheaper and better."