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Strategies to reduce confusion

Taming the morning circus is a matter of organization. While each operation has its own unique organizational wrinkles, strategies tend to be essentially the same from company to company. They include:

- ▶ Orienting the staff in advance about what's to be done each day, and making sure they understand and appreciate the cost of wasted time and effort.
- ▶ Coordinating the efforts of all departments so that they work together in the cause of improved efficiency
- ▶ Training people in equipment operation and productive labor methods
- ▶ Organizing the day's work and keeping all personnel up to speed on jobs by posting schedules, having meetings and communicating one-on-one
- ▶ Maintaining and repairing equipment, and fueling vehicles in advance so that both are ready for action when the day begins
- ▶ Establishing rules and consequences for tardiness and the inefficient use of time, and enforcing those penalties fairly and appropriately when necessary

— DG

continued from page 40

No one seriously objects to these measures, Loyet claims. "I've been doing this for 17 years," he says. "I learned about taming the morning circus the hard way, but now we have everything squared away. You have to be mindful of the cost of time in this business and any other business. Every wasted man-hour works against you, so when you have 60 guys screwing around for even an hour, it can kill you. We're talking about losing big bucks here. Fortunately, our people know that, and we make sure they also know that their job security depends greatly on the health of the company they work for."



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Circle 116



◀ Storing equipment in the proper place goes a long way in taming the morning circus.

Labor hours are the building blocks of profit in the lawn maintenance business, and labor is the

biggest production cost. Smart company owners spec their jobs with that in mind.

"We map out all the day's activities in advance," says Joe Munie, President of Munie Outdoor Services, Inc., Caseyville, IL, a company with 100 trucks and 170 employees. "We also do contingency planning. If rain cancels a sod or grassing job, we switch to mulching. We stagger start times as well, which really helps cut back on congestion. The idea is to get everyone out and about as quickly as possible. Right now, we try to get the trucks on the road within 10 minutes of their start time. We think that's pretty good, but we want to do better. Where efficiency's concerned, you can always do better."

Be the enforcer

Allan Davis, Executive Vice President of R.A.R. Landscaping Company, Baltimore, MD, believes that many companies are "lax" about enforcing strict morning policies because quality workers are hard to get. But in the long run, landscape companies can't afford to have employees who arrive late to work, show up out of uniform or miss days, says Davis, whose company employs about 130 workers during the season.

Davis says all employees have to know what's expected of them, and what they can expect when they fail to live up to their responsibilities. You've got to make sure all your ducks are in a row — the trucks gassed up and the equipment in good working order, for starters.

"We have a 22,000-square-foot facility with all departments under one roof," says Davis. "We bought the property with nothing on it so that we could build from scratch with efficiency in mind. That's how seriously we take the morning circus around here."

R.A.R. Landscaping, Loyet Landscape Maintenance and Munie Outdoor Services, along with a growing number of other companies, realize how lost minutes turn

into lost hours that, over the course of several months, turn into lost days of production. The solution starts first thing every morning at company headquarters. **L.M.**

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Circle 117

Property at a glance

Location: College Station, TX

Grounds Supervisor: Tommy Palmos

Category: School or University Grounds

Total budget: \$177,500

Year site built: 1997

Acres of turf: 75

Acres of woody ornamentals: 22

Acres of display beds: 19,600 sq. ft.

Total paved area: 15 acres

Total man-hours/week: 320

Maintenance challenges

- ▶ Zoysiagrass panels
- ▶ Alternanthera bed preparation & maintenance
- ▶ Tree & shrub maintenance

Project checklist

Completed in last two years:

- ▶ Presidential gravesite
- ▶ Star-shaped design for fountain bed
- ▶ Restructuring of lakeside beds

On the job

- ▶ 8 full-time staff, 0 seasonal employees, 2 licensed pesticide applicators

George Bush Presidential Library

2002 PGMS Grand Award Winner for School or University Grounds

"George and Barb were out here the other day," says Tommy Palmos, Superintendent for Landscape & Pavements Maintenance.

He's referring of course to the President and his wife, who Palmos is on a first-name basis with. And why not? He sees them often enough when they visit their apartment at the library named after George's father at Texas A & M University.

But being that close to the President isn't all it's cracked up to be. Palmos says there are foreign dignitaries and former Presidents passing through all the time, which means the grounds can never have an off day.

A section leader, a crew leader, and a six-person crew work together to handle mowing, woody ornamental and shrub



Over 19,600 sq. ft. of color display beds — now that's a lot of deadheading for Tommy Palmos (left) and crew to do.

maintenance, and color bed preparation and upkeep. Special events frequently take place on the grounds, so the crew has to work around that schedule. Palmos empowers crew members to make their own decisions on that end.

PGMS
Landscape
MANAGEMENT

Editors' note: *Landscape Management* is the exclusive sponsor of the Green Star Professional Grounds Management Awards for outstanding management of residential, commercial and institutional landscapes. The 2003 winners will be named at the annual meeting of the Professional Grounds Management Society in November. For more information on the 2002 Awards, contact PGMS at:

720 Light St. • Baltimore, MD 21230 • Phone: 410/223-2861. Web-site: www.pgms.org

Over 8,000 plants in the circle beds on the grounds demand constant attention from the crew.



More than 22 acres of woody ornamentals that tend to give crews maintenance headaches please the dignitaries who pass through the site.

Drought —

prepare a plan

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

BY RON HALL / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

S mudgy 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.

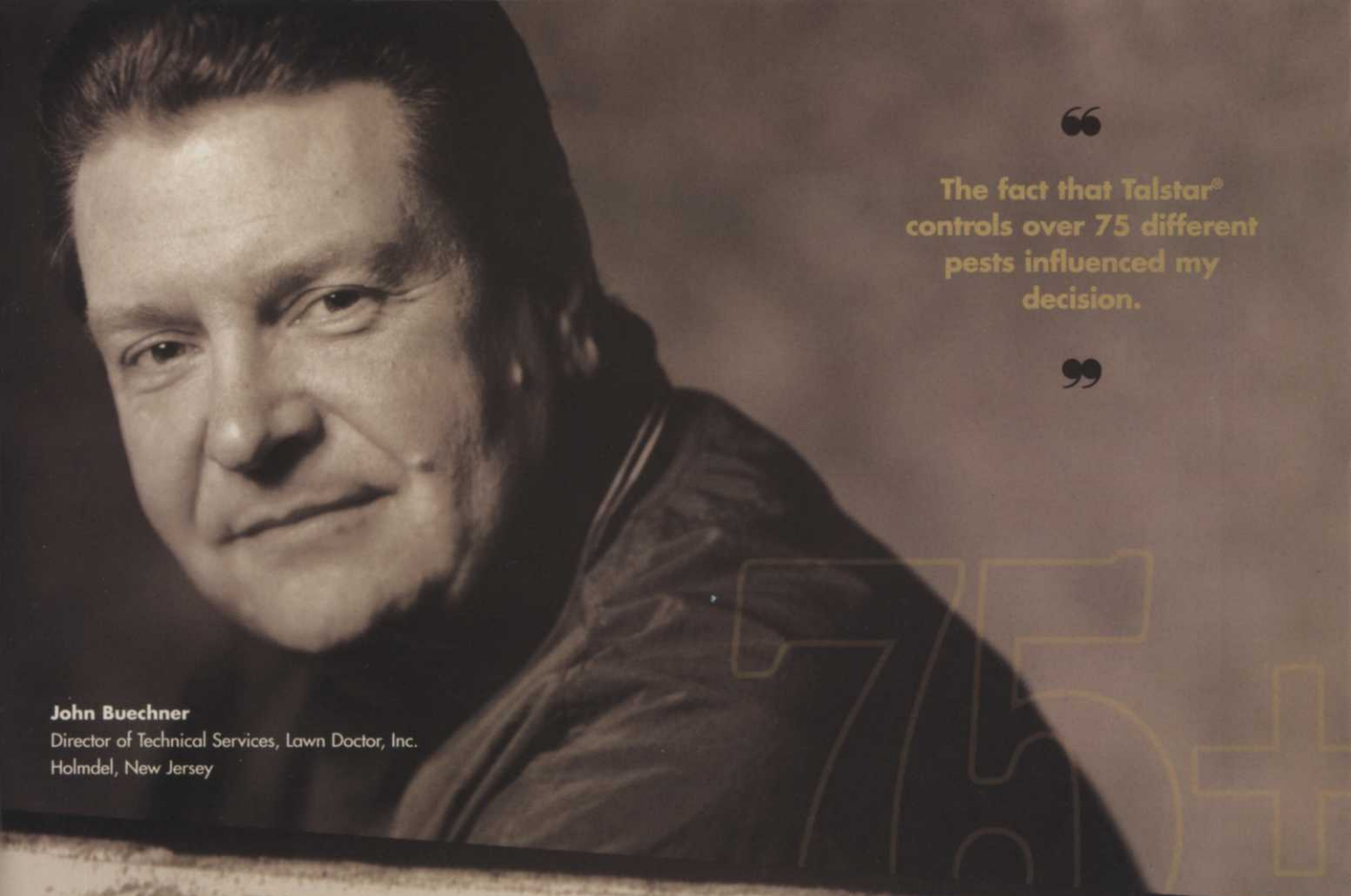
Tollefson and most other

continued on page 48

U.S. DROUGHT MONITOR



SOURCE: NOAA DROUGHT MONITOR



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John Buechner

Director of Technical Services, Lawn Doctor, Inc.
Holmdel, New Jersey

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Circle No. 119

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.

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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**

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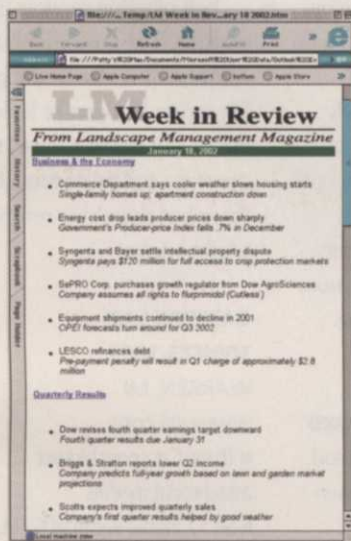
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Put some pull in your plow

BY CURT HARLER

The two-plow concept — that two plows are better than one — is catching on in some heavy snow markets.

Charlie Nemeth, owner of Nemeth Landscaping, Johnstown, PA, got into snow removal to service his landscaping accounts.

"I was cutting my snow removal time in half, especially on

driveways," Nemeth says of using two plows. "I can back in to clear a driveway after my competitor has already started on an adjacent drive and finish my drive before he's half done with his."

Tom Kuhn, owner of Collision Experts, Clifton Park, NY, has been snowplowing residen-

tial areas for a decade. "I was tired of turning around, back-dragging, and waiting on cars to get out of the way," he says. He tried out a Snowman back plow on a Dodge 2500 and was able to cut his snow removal time by five hours per snowfall.

Back plows, also called pull plows, work best when an operator has a lot of driveways on the route. Some operators combine a front and a back blade on parking lot jobs, allowing them to operate in both directions like a ferry boat.

Kuhn says there's a safety factor involved, too. "It's more dangerous to back into the street," he notes.

Sell plowing like insurance

Charging by the job is a good way to go broke in the snowplowing business.

Most contractors require either a flat contract price for snowplowing or a minimum guarantee against a contract.

That way, whether it snows twice a season or twice a week, the plow contractor gets paid. Since it's imperative to have equipment serviced and ready, and to have workers on hand, it's only fair that the plow man be treated like a fireman on call.

Sell plowing services like insurance. The customer buys a contract. If it snows, the plowing service's coverage kicks into effect. If it doesn't snow, the coverage and protection are still there but there's no refund for a light winter.

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Circle #256

Service tips

What should a plow service do now to get ready for this winter? Greg Daniels, President of Daniels Plow, East Dundee, IL, offers the following tips:

- ▶ Get equipment up and running
- ▶ Be prepared for anything
- ▶ Follow the weather
- ▶ Inform clients that someone will be first served and someone will be last
- ▶ Change the order of plowing so one customer isn't always last (or first)
- ▶ Give clients a cell phone

number so they can contact a driver if they're off their drive in a ditch

- ▶ Plan to start work at 2 a.m. or 4 a.m., depending on weather

▶ After a three-inch snowfall, all customers' properties should be finished in eight hours; a big snow may take 24 hours or more to clear