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Juan C. Vila

CEO
Vila and Son
Miami, Florida



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OREGON GRASS SEED CROP ESTIMATES*

SPECIES	HARVESTED ACRES	PRODUCTION	PRICE PER CWT	SALES
2008 Perennial ryegrass	122,860	174,861,000	75.62	\$132,230,000
2009 Perennial ryegrass	107,420	165,061,000	49.67	\$81,984,000
2010 Perennial ryegrass	91,579	146,590,000	49.50	\$72,569,000
2008 Tall fescue	174,580	262,237,000	67.07	\$175,833,000
2009 Tall fescue	157,570	268,223,000	40.04	\$107,409,000
2010 Tall fescue	117,080	186,363,000	31.52	\$58,734,000
2008 Kentucky bluegrass	20,500	26,132,000	111.46	\$29,127,000
2009 Kentucky bluegrass	17,970	18,967,000	104.69	\$19,857,000
2010 Kentucky bluegrass	13,350	16,445,000	96.37	\$15,848,000

* The majority of cool season grass seed is produced in Oregon. The figures are indicative of the industry as a whole.

Source: Extension Economic Information Office, Oregon State University

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Chicago lawn care company very early in his 40-year industry career.

That experience and everything he's learned since has convinced him that homeowners will not accept a lawn that's not green and attractive, even if it is more "sustainable".

Green still king

Proof of this is not hard to find.

An effort to popularize the use of buffalograss to California homeowners during a severe drought in the late 1980s fell flat on its face, says Dr. Ali Harivandi, longtime environmental horticulturist at the University of California, Davis. Homeowners didn't take to the drought-tolerant native grass, which had been improved in Nebraska and is still extensively used in the Plain States. Californians, who have year-round outdoor lifestyles, didn't like that buffalograss goes dormant and brown five months of the year, and doesn't do well in shade or under traffic.

"We, in this industry, tend to oversell things," says Harivandi. "We tend to talk about all the attributes of a particular grass and we don't tell about the problems. People get excited to do something, and when, later on, they find out that it wasn't so great there is a backlash."

Harivandi says when he arrived in California 30 years ago most lawns were Kentucky bluegrass or a mixture of bluegrass and ryegrass. Now, most are turf-type tall fescue, except for Bermudagrass, which is common in hot, desert communities.

"I have no doubt we have reduced water use on lawns by 15% to 20% over these past 30 years by switching from Kentucky bluegrass to tall fescue," he says.

Cornell's Rossi feels a similar shift to tall fescues and away from less-water-efficient varieties of bluegrass would reduce landscape water use in the Northeast. That is if (a big "if") property owners would do a better job of watering.

"We are the worst water managers in the world in the Northeast. We don't get it. Typically, we count on precipitation to forgive us our sins," he says.

In recent years, both Harivandi and Rossi have been looking at a range of fine-leaf fescues as a viable option for certain types of low-maintenance, low-water-use landscapes. While they're not suitable for home lawns — at least not when they're allowed to grow to their full height or mowed at four inches as they are in some locations of the Cornell campus — they could be just the grass for industrial sites, highway medians,

naturalized commercial sites, slopes and even as decorative mounds on residential landscapes.

Similar strides are being made in the development and improvement of warm-season turfgrasses.

In 1993 the University of Georgia initiated its seashore paspalum breeding program and has since released several attractive cultivars that grow well using saline water. So far, seashore paspalum been used mostly on golf courses and sports fields, but the species' popularity for home lawns should grow as more communities mandate or offer reclaimed water for landscape irrigation.

Meanwhile, the University of Florida is touting its UltimateFLora Zoysiagrass as an alternative to St. Augustinegrass, the predominant lawn grass in Florida around the Gulf Coast. The University says that its improved zoysia requires less water and fertilizer to stay healthy and attractive than St. Augustine.

Discovering genetics and incorporating them into new cultivars that deal with drought and other environmental stresses is a slow painstaking process, but it continues on a steady pace.

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Setting the TONE?

As New Jersey passes the most restrictive fertilizer legislation to date, other states may be looking to follow suit. BY CASEY PAYTON

AFTER TWO YEARS of negotiations, New Jersey's Fertilizer Pre-Emption Bill was signed in January, with what is now the most restrictive legislation in the country. It's no doubt that many states will soon follow suit and that has many worried about what's in store for the future of the industry.

"I was willing to adapt to any changes regarding the fertilizer type we put down or even the amount — but to put a restriction on when you can apply the product crossed the line," admits Jeff Cooper, president of Lawn Con-

nection, West Berlin NJ. "It hit a nerve with me. That'll affect my livelihood."

What Cooper is referring to is part of the legislation that prohibits fertilizer applications before March 1st or after December 1st. Among other things, the legislation restricts the amount of quick-release nitrogen allowed in products and application amounts; bans all phosphorus use (no phosphorus can be used unless a soil test proves phosphorus application is needed or after soil disturbance when reestablishing turf surfaces); prohibits applications when raining or

on impervious surfaces; requires all professionals to be certified; and establishes fines for noncompliance with all of these regulations. The comprehensiveness of this legislation has made it the strictest in the country to date.

“Other states have phosphorous bans and date restrictions but none address nitrogen restrictions and the percentage of slow-release nitrogen,” says Jim Jensen, regional sales manager, Nufarm Turf & Specialty — Nufarm Americas, and a member of the board of directors of the New Jersey Green Industry Council (NJGIC), an umbrella organization which represents, promotes and defends Green Industry interests. “All of these various elements in one bill are what makes it so restrictive. Never has a fertilizer law incorporated so much regulation.”

Lawn care operators (LCOs) are finding this troubling, but it seems the shortened season is the biggest worry of all. “Economically that’s going to zing us,” admits Cooper, who says he’s already become an organic-based company and dramatically reduced the amount of pesticides he’s putting down. “I feel like we were doing everything right, and they’re still coming after us. I value every single day I have to work, including the months of December, January and February. I feel like I’m now a seasonal business. I’m only getting nine months to operate, and if you also subtract the bad weather days, it may be down to eight.”

Nancy Sadlon, executive director of NJGIC, says unfortunately the differing date restrictions and content requirements for consumers vs. and professionals were part of the emotion-based legislation that passed without any scientific backing, including information about weather fluctuations and freeze and thaw variations. “In a world that’s regulated based on science, we would have one standard for both consumers and professionals and dates of applications would be region specific without

the limiting windows,” she says. “But now, even if the ground isn’t frozen and the turf active, they can’t apply fertilizer simply because of a law’s limiting dates. Since LCOs can only do so much in the time period they’re now dealing with, it’s going to limit business growth.”

A fight for science

NJGIC has been involved in the discussions about nutrient management since it began about five years ago. Their primary role as a consolidating voice for the whole Green Industry in New Jersey has been education and communication to regulators at New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) about real world lawn care operations. Sadlon says they fought for science-based legislation when the conversation seemed to be driven by emotion. “Just one example is we surprised many of the decision makers involved when we showed them professional lawn care companies have already eliminated phosphorus from many of their programs because there was no need to add the nutrient,” she says. “This practice was started over 15 years ago.”

While Sadlon was happy with many of the compromises NJGIC was able to reach, she says a lot of emotion-based information still made it into the bill. Once these types of unscientific regulations make it into the law books, they can be hard to change, and since emotion-based policy is spreading, it would behoove others to get involved now since it does seem other states will be soon to follow suit, she adds.

“It’s already happening,” asserts John Buechner, director of technical services at Lawn Doctor, Inc. “Pennsylvania is in the draft stages of a bill, and Maryland is even a little ahead of them. Plus, Delaware and Virginia are also considering legislation because of their own proximity to the Chesapeake Bay.”

And these other states are adopting the language from New Jersey’s bill. “It’s likely New Jersey is going to be a

THOUGHTS ON NJ’S FERTILIZER PRE-EMPTION BILL

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NANCY SADLON,
New Jersey Green Industry Council



“It’s likely that New Jersey is going to be a model for future legislation. And just looking at what’s happening in these states near large bodies of water, you can predict that the Great Lakes states may be the next targets.”

JOHN BUECHNER,
Lawn Doctor





model for future legislation,” says Buechner. “And just looking at what’s happening in these states near large bodies of water, you can predict the Great Lakes states may be the next targets.”

Buechner says LCOs can make a difference in what their regulations will be if they’re willing to get involved. “Individuals may feel helpless but they can make a difference when they join together and form coalitions with others in the industry,” he says. “Even if you don’t want to be a part of the group doing the advocating, a small contribution can help support the people who are doing it for you. Most of those people are making that effort on a volunteer basis and putting their own time and money into fighting for the best legislation for the whole industry.”

What happened in New Jersey should be a call to action for the rest

of the country, Jensen adds. “There is a clear agenda by environmentalists to characterize fertilizers as a primary cause of the nutrient problems of our waters — despite lack of evidence to prove such a claim,” he stresses adding that the basis of the environmental activists’ push is they feel nitrogen ends up in nearby waterways as a result of fertilizer runoff, but science proves there are many contributing factors. Commercial turf fertilizers are a minor contributor, but the easiest target to go after. “Legislators like to be saviors of the environment, and so long as it is perceived by their voting public to be true, they will accept these false claims about fertilizers and pesticides. Efforts to stand up for our products and practices have never been more important.”

The “Safe Playing Fields Act” (a bill that would impose a ban on the use of all pesticides at schools, child care facilities and recreation fields) is the next big issue for New Jersey, and Cooper says he’s

63



% of lawn care professionals who will purchase fertilizer or fertilizer/pesticide combination products this year.

SOURCE: LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

going to be ready this time around. “I’m going to learn as much about the bill as I can and represent my side — the small businesses of New Jersey. I’m learning you can’t change the world, but you can get your voice out there and be heard.”

Strong voices can make a difference in the end result of a bill, Sadlon adds.

And with regulations like these, industry professionals agree even small changes can make a big difference on business survival. **LM**

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@questex.com.

10 steps to successful satellite yards

The industry has used satellite yards throughout its history. Personally, I have used them throughout my career. I have had mixed results, as have clients of mine. When satellite yards are successful, the benefits are very rewarding. If there are problems, however, they can be very troublesome.

Contractors usually use satellites to reduce travel time, and sometimes to add storage space. They usually satisfy that need. This benefit can be offset by some of the associated consequences.

The list of challenges that satellites create is fairly long:

- › maintaining your company culture;
- › control;
- › accidents;
- › surprises resulting in contract loss;
- › low morale;
- › equipment abuse and theft;
- › administrative issues; and
- › employee retention.

There are probably some that I have missed. Given this long list, why would someone consider this option? The reality is that there is risk to almost anything; you just have to know how to mitigate it.

Here are 10 best practices to avoid the pitfalls of satellite yards, and turn a potential problem into a worthy solution.

Contractors use satellites to **reduce travel time** and **add storage** space. When satellite yards are successful, the benefits are very rewarding.

- 1** Staff the satellite with tenured, trusted key employees.
- 2** Make sure you have systems working in your base operations that will also work in a remote location.
- 3** Management must communicate daily with the manager of the satellite.
- 4** Provide the same communication to the satellite that you provide your base employees on company news, policies, etc.
- 5** Bring the satellite employees to the base at least quarterly so they are included as part of the team.
- 6** Owners and key managers must be visible to the satellite employees at least a couple times per month.
- 7** Stock the satellite with the best and newest equipment to minimize breakdowns, which are hard to support.
- 8** Make sure you have figured out how to give shop support and maintain a preventive maintenance program.
- 9** Have management “take the temperature” of employees so that you can beware of changes in morale.
- 10** Senior management must stay close to customers to measure satisfaction.

Good management can help assure that the satellite yard is successful. If you *consistently* follow the best practices above, you will be successful.

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James River Grounds Management is the largest privately held provider of landscape management services in the central Virginia region. The company was formed in 1989 by Ray F. Lazarchic and Michael C. Hildebrand and was sold in 2005 to four members of the management team, **Maria Candler**, president and CEO; Jason Knight, vice president and COO; Todd Pendleton, vice president business development; and James Batterson, director of facilities. *LM* spoke with Candler on how the current leadership deals with today's management issues.



Maria Candler

TOP TRENDS

› **Quality is no longer the differential.** For so many years we were the "quality" company. That was how we set ourselves apart from our competition. Times are constantly changing. Now it's about being who you need to be to the person you're dealing with in any given moment. We've worked hard to maintain our culture as a quality, relationship driven company. Flexibility however, is what has sustained our success. We are learning each day how we can meet our customers ever-changing needs while still being true to who we are.

› **Do more with less.** I've noticed that these are the days that separate the men from the boys. It's helped us that we are always focusing on what can be eliminated even when times are good. As our costs increase but our customers are paying less, that mentality has really helped us thrive in a down economy. The successful contractors that I talk with regularly have been on a lean business management journey for several years not just in reaction to the marketplace changes.

› **Creativity/flexibility with contracts.** Our ability to be creative and flexible with our pricing and specifications has become increasingly important. We have been a relationship-focused company since the beginning. Lately we have seen that relationship we have built with our customers doesn't give us the benefits it used to. It has at least kept us in the negotiations, which allows us to demonstrate our flexibility and therefore will always remain our focus where customers are concerned.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Employee recruiting.** The high unemployment rate has only translated into more applicants who need to be processed but still yield dismal results. It's still very challenging to recruit a

INSIDE INFO

Company: James River Grounds Management

Website: www.jrgm.com

Founded: 1989

Headquarters: Glen Allen, VA

LM Top 150 Ranking: 60, with revenue of \$19,760,785

Employees: 441 full-time/
3 part-time

Key to being a maintenance leader: A culture of continuous improvement has made a huge impact on our growth. We have never been afraid to change. The day we stop evolving and accept status quo is the day we start shrinking. Another key is sharing our performance goals and actuals with the team. Everyone needs to know where the company is headed and how they fit into the big picture.

legal, stable work force. More and more each year our human resources staff is operating much like our sales team. Hire 10, hope to keep 2. Bid on \$1,000,000, hope to close \$200,000. The up side is that it's forced us to really tighten up on our hiring procedures and look more closely at our staffing benchmarks. We're working with a variety of government agencies to promote our jobs as well as hosting our own job fairs.

› **Government regulations.** Everywhere we turn, legislative changes are causing great challenges. The recent regulatory changes with prevailing wage calculations for the H-2B program, as well as more changes looming on the horizon, could make that program unusable. E-Verify is much closer to reaching the end goal of mandatory for all businesses. We watch pesticide and water restrictions closely. As tough as these changes are, there are opportunities attached to each. For example, our irrigation technicians have obtained certifications that exhibit their expertise in effective water management.

They are poised and ready to guide our customers through tough restrictions on water usage.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Quality of management team.** For the past two years we have been very focused on the quality of our management team. We buy the same equipment and products as our competitors. We recruit from the same labor pool. The quality of this team is our best opportunity to set ourselves apart. Focusing on this team is how we go from being grass cutters to landscape professionals. We've brought some really great people onto our team in the last few years. We're focused and committed to building a career ladder for them. It's very exciting.