

THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE

SPORTS TURF COULD BRING NEW LIFE TO TURF EXTENSION



Extension turfgrass specialists in many states are fighting for their jobs. As key specialists from the '60s and '70s retire, they are often not replaced. Frozen or declining budgets are forcing many universities to consolidate two or more turf positions into one. Turf researchers are being forced to solicit grants from private industry and state turfgrass associations to save their programs.

This erosion of skill will not stop until a strong new reason to fund turfgrass research and assistance is found.

The fact is one already exists—the unsafe condition of public athletic fields. Ask yourself the question, “Are recreation and health in this country as important as agriculture?” Here’s another one, “What percentage of the population is concerned about fitness as compared to agriculture?” Since turf extension has always been a stepchild to agriculture, these questions are extremely valid and separate the turf specialist from the farm service for consideration by taxpayers and budgetmakers.

I can hear the farm extension agent saying, “We carried turf all these years and now you want to turn your back on us.” The response is we just want to have turf, more specifically sports turf, considered for its own needs, not as a place for the “leftovers” in a depressed farm economy.

Sports turf is breathing new life into turf extension programs in North Carolina, Texas, Maryland, Illinois, Virginia and California. It can do the same for Arizona, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and other states where strong programs are being threatened by budget cutbacks. State turf associations are starting to push sports turf in Texas, North Carolina and Maryland. They are providing seminars and services that public institutions could not afford otherwise. These public employees are meeting a public need for better and safer sports facilities.

Turf specialists can no longer be accused of spending most of their time serving golf courses at public expense. Although the majority of courses today are public, it is just one sport. There are many more sports and many more supporters when a turf specialist serves “all sports.” And, we aren’t talking just about games, we are talking about safety, health and fitness. The demand for sports fields has never been as great and continues to grow by leaps and bounds. As their use increases, their condition declines. Park superintendents can’t keep soccer fields safe with the amount of use they receive.

To get more use out of existing fields, parks and schools are installing lights and adding another 30 hours of wear and tear each week. Superintendents reason that lights on two fields can save them the cost of building and maintaining a third field.

Just like lights can help public institutions get more use out of their fields, improved field maintenance recommended by extension turf specialists can keep these fields safe under much greater use.

The point is turf specialists can justify their own salaries by keeping our limited number of public sports fields in play and saving public agencies the cost of defending themselves in injury lawsuits. If governments can afford lights, certainly they should be able to afford the important services of turf specialists.

We have to stop the erosion of the turf extension service. A strong reason to stop it exists. Without public turf specialists, I doubt if public fields will make it through the next decade, and instead of paying turf specialists we will be paying lawyers.

Bruce Shank

EVENTS

CALENDAR

JANUARY

21-23 Virginia Turfgrass Conference and Trade Show, Virginia Beach Pavilion Convention Center, Virginia Beach, VA. Contact J. R. Hall, (703) 961-5797.

21-22 Northern California Turf & Landscape Exposition, Santa Clara Convention Center, Santa Clara, CA. Contact Northern California Turfgrass Council, P.O. Box 268, Lafayette, CA 94549.

31-1 Sports Turf Managers Association Annual Meeting, Phoenix Civic Plaza, Phoenix, AZ. Contact STMA, 1458 North Euclid Ave., Ontario, CA 91764. (714) 984-4677.

31-2 58th International Golf Course Show, Phoenix Civic Plaza, Phoenix, AZ. Contact the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, 1617 St. Andrews Drive, Lawrence, KS 66046. 1-800-GSA-SUPT.

FEBRUARY

15-18 American Society of Golf Course Architects Annual Meeting, Royal Lahaina Hotel, Maui, Hawaii. Contact ASGCA, 221 North La Salle Street, Chicago, IL 60601. (312) 372-7090.

18-19 Southwest Athletic Turf Clinic, Will Rogers Memorial Complex, Fort Worth, TX. Contact Athletic Turf Association, Inc., P.O. Box 1114, Hurst, TX 76053. (817) 282-4965.

MARCH

2-5 Massachusetts Turfgrass Conference, Springfield Civic Center, Springfield, MA. Contact Dr. Joe Troll, University of Massachusetts, Dept. of Soil Science, Stockbridge Hall, Amherst, MA 01003. (413) 549-5295.

9-11 Winter Turf Short Course, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN. Contact Tom Samples, Box 1071, Knoxville, TN 37901-1071.

APRIL

4-6 National School Boards Association Annual Exposition, Moscone Convention Center, San Francisco, CA. Contact NSBA, 1680 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. (703) 838-6722.