
EXPLORING EQUIPMENT

Employee Safety Education Program Provides Lasting Benefits

By Rick Rodier

In one year, more than 75,000 turf maintenance-related accident victims were admitted to hospital emergency rooms, as reported by the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission in 1990. Operator familiarity with basic safety principles can help decrease the number and severity of accidents.

Most employers, sports turf managers, and golf course superintendents are aware of their responsibility regarding turf maintenance equipment safety training for employees. Unfortunately, not all are aware of the harsh consequences associated with neglecting to implement a comprehensive operator safety education program. In addition to serious injury and loss of human life, there are sobering economic and legal repercussions for employers.

One study by the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company revealed that more than 25 percent of workers' compensation claims by golf course maintenance employees are mower-related. This results in an average workers' compensation claim of \$3,600, according to St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company claim data from 1986-1991.

In certain states, employers found grossly negligent in employee safety training can be held liable for on-the-job accidents above workers' compensation payments. For employers, this can be a costly ordeal in terms of legal fees, and they can risk their reputations as responsible employers.

Existing state and federal laws require every employer to furnish a safe place of employment and a safe working environment for employees. California law mandates employers to "establish, implement and maintain an effective written injury-prevention program...and to provide specified (safety) employee training," according to California State Senate Bill No. 198 as approved on Oct. 2, 1989. Under California law, employers can expect regular inspections and evaluations of their injury prevention programs.

Choosing a Safety Program

Program materials for safety education do exist. One resource is manufacturers within the green industry. For example, The Toro Company recently joined efforts with the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company in developing the nation's first comprehensive operator safety education program for the commercial turf maintenance industry. The program responds to the significant number of injuries related to turf maintenance activities.

Select a turf-maintenance equipment safety education program that will fit your personnel needs. Consider the following selection criteria:

- *Individual application.* The program should help operators take control of their own safety. "Individual responsibility is the key to injury prevention," says Jim Seifert, senior attorney for The Toro Company. "A safety training program should help correct the *It can't happen to me* attitude. Each employee should complete the safety training program feeling confident and capable of immediately applying the information covered.

- *Easy to understand.* The safety program you choose will need to address individuals with varying levels of education and comprehension. A multiple-format program that incorporates several mediums will help you reach people with different learning styles.

- *Language and content diversity.* If the majority of your employees are Hispanic, consider a safety program in both Spanish and English. Have the material translated for both trainer and trainees into a language that will allow you to reach your entire workforce. (Check the language the warning labels on your equipment appear in, and translate as necessary.)

- *Testing and ongoing training.* Look for a program that provides follow-up testing materials for trainees. Tests provide added learning incentive and help hold people accountable for remember-

ing vital information. Test results also provide legal documentation of training efforts.

Content More Vital Than Length

Address three vital safety areas:

- *Preparing to operate the equipment.* Safety begins with a proper attitude and respect for the equipment and the danger it represents. Prior to starting the engine, operators should read all relevant manuals and safety instructions. They should also be wearing proper protective clothing and gear and complete all pre-operational equipment and work area checks.

- *During equipment operation.* Operators should practice in large, open areas before engaging cutting systems. Operators should know proper equipment speeds for mowing around hazards, hill mowing and transport, as well as proper deck guard and deflector adjustments. Each operator should also know his or her own physical limitations to prevent unnecessary strain and carelessness.

- *Working around the equipment.* In detail, cover topics, such as proper use of the parking brake, safe blade adjustments and shutting down the unit. Operators should know to keep their hands and clothing away from blades, proper equipment cleaning techniques, and safe refueling practices.

The job of turf-maintenance equipment safety training can be challenging. Like any method of education, it requires time and patience. However, the obvious health, economic and legal consequences of operating your company without a program should be incentive enough to begin an employee safety program immediately.

For more information on the Toro/St. Paul Fire and Marine operator safety education program, contact The Toro Company, Commercial Marketing Services Dept., 8111 Lyndale Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55420-1196. □

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