

Sports turf managers going “green”



Check mark image courtesy of istockphoto.com.

By Kevin Meredith, CSFM

The “green movement” describes an awakening of consciousness in regard to how we view, use and conserve the earth’s resources and our environment. Its basis is sustainability, safety and ecological awareness.

We are all involved with the green movement in some way and probably have been unknowing participants for years. If you are pumping 10% ethanol into your gas tank, use more energy efficient fluorescent bulbs, recycle your plastic bottles or your aluminum cans you are part of it. We do things every day that have a positive impact on our quality of life and never give them a thought.

As sports turf managers we have the added responsibility of providing safe playing surfaces while operating under increasingly restrictive regulations. Federal, state and local laws are continuously changing and political pressure from parents and user groups are constantly forcing us to reevaluate how we can do our jobs effectively while still conforming to these regulations and demands.

Over the years I have figured out there are two ways to approach this kind of change: *reactive*, which plays out exactly like it sounds. As situations change and impact how you do things your responses and solutions are the result of having to react to and mitigate a crisis.

But being *proactive* allows you the most control of a situation, where you can anticipate changes and prepare for alternatives. This can take away the surprise factor and avoid crises.

Being aware of your own management style will be a key component in understanding and responding to the ever increasing challenges associated

with environmental stewardship. To find out how turf managers around the country were dealing with going green, I called a few friends along with some randomly selected names from the STMA Membership Directory. I asked them to identify areas in their operation that have changed as a result of an increased awareness of environmental concerns.

It was no surprise to find out that the vast majority of changes have come about because of budgetary pressure and not the result of altruism. One thing that I found to be very interesting was the elevated level of awareness shown by those individuals who have come over to sports turf after being associated with GCSAA. There is something to be said for the quality and quantity of environmental education offered to golf course superintendents.

My first call was to Carol Baker, CSFM at Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, CA. I knew from previous conversations with her at STMA Conferences that she had been involved in the golf industry and that she is environmentally aware. Her greatest challenge is the efficient use of water resources. Using technology developed by the irrigation industry she has been able to greatly improve the efficiency of her water system.

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Carol Baker
CSFM at Mt. San
Antonio College,
Walnut, CA

She has a weather station tied to a Rain Bird Maxicom central control system and uses it to regulate the irrigation on her athletic fields and her landscapes. Carol notes that being an ET based system she is able to feel confident and comfortable with the amount of water being applied.

Carol feels like she is proactive in regard to her green challenges and credits much of that to the time she spent as a golf course superintendent.

I got lucky on my next call by finding a gentleman who has more than 30 years of school district and parks and rec experience. Douglas Johnsen, now with the Valley Center Parks and Rec Department in Encinitas, CA is a man on a mission!



Douglas Johnsen
Valley Center Parks
and Rec Dept.,
Encinitas, CA

When I first spoke with him he was feeling very fortunate about his water situation because growers in the southern California had been forced to reduce their water consumption by 30%. He is under a voluntary stage of water restrictions and is using non-potable water. He constantly monitors his water use to maximize the efficiency of his irrigation system.

Like many other parks and rec managers Doug is also responsible for buildings and parking areas. To help with cooling his building he obtained a grant from his Gas and Electric Company through the Cool Communities Shade Tree Program. This program uses the strategic placement of trees to create shade on buildings to aid in cooling.

He has addressed energy conservation issues by changing light bulbs and reducing the number of lights being used. Thermostats in the buildings have been upgraded to the energy efficient programmable type. Doug also noted that the shift is being made to have all of the new parking lots be made of decomposed granite (DG). DG is permeable, allows runoff to be absorbed and absorbs far less heat than traditional paving surfaces.

He is also being proactive when it comes to his grounds care equipment, shopping a lot harder to find more fuel efficient equipment that will still get the job done. He has changed over to electric hedge trimmers to save fuel and reduce pollution. On other power equipment he is in the process of eliminating 2 stroke engines and replacing them with 4 stroke, enabling the district to meet emission rules.

Finally, Doug reports that one of his biggest challenges has been routing and scheduling of vehicles and maintenance personnel to conserve gas and time. Doug will be happy to answer your questions at dougjohnsen@sbcglobal.net.

Next stop: Phoenix, where David Shilling, a 10-year member of STMA, maintains 45 acres by himself for the Paradise Valley School District at the Shadow Mountain High School. He has no water restrictions at this time but does his best to conserve by monitoring and maintaining the irrigation system. He feels that in the future water issues are going to have to be addressed, for now he is just going to see how it plays out.

The school system has a recycling program in place and has instituted a major cutback in energy usage, in the past they were subsidized but are now footing the entire bill. Part of David's contribution was to go to florescent lighting in his



David Shilling
Paradise Valley
School District,
Shadow Mountain
High School
Phoenix, AZ

shop and try to be more efficient operating his equipment. The IPM program he uses has been in place for years and he is pleased that he isn't playing catch up trying to implement it.

I crossed the country to find Kevin Johnson, turf manager for the City of Deltona, FL. Kevin has always believed in IPM and has always tried to be a good environmental steward, which he credits to his time as a superintendent. This retired US Army drill sergeant tells it like it is. He doesn't believe we could ever go completely organic and still have our fields perform at the



Kevin Johnson
Turf manager
Deltona, FL

levels need to maintain safe fields. He feels that quick recovery is probably the most important factor we need to manage for, without it our fields will take a nose dive and never take the traffic pushed on them.

I have been to his fields and they reflect the passion Kevin has for sports turf management. Ron Randall started at SUNY Oswego in upstate New York 2 years ago. Here are a few of the many changes he has implemented in the grounds department:

- Stopped weekly mowing of a non use turf area that was mowed just for aesthetics. Instead we will bush hog or flail mow it 2X yearly saving fuel and time.
- Shuts vehicles off when possible, no leaving the A/C on in the truck when you stop to use the bathroom. Vehicles are shut off during break and lunch as well, unless they are fighting snow and need to keep defrosters running, etc. In winter they still do what is necessary to safely maintain campus. Started a few test areas where they planted fine fescues in areas that they hope



Ron Randall
SUNY Oswego,
New York

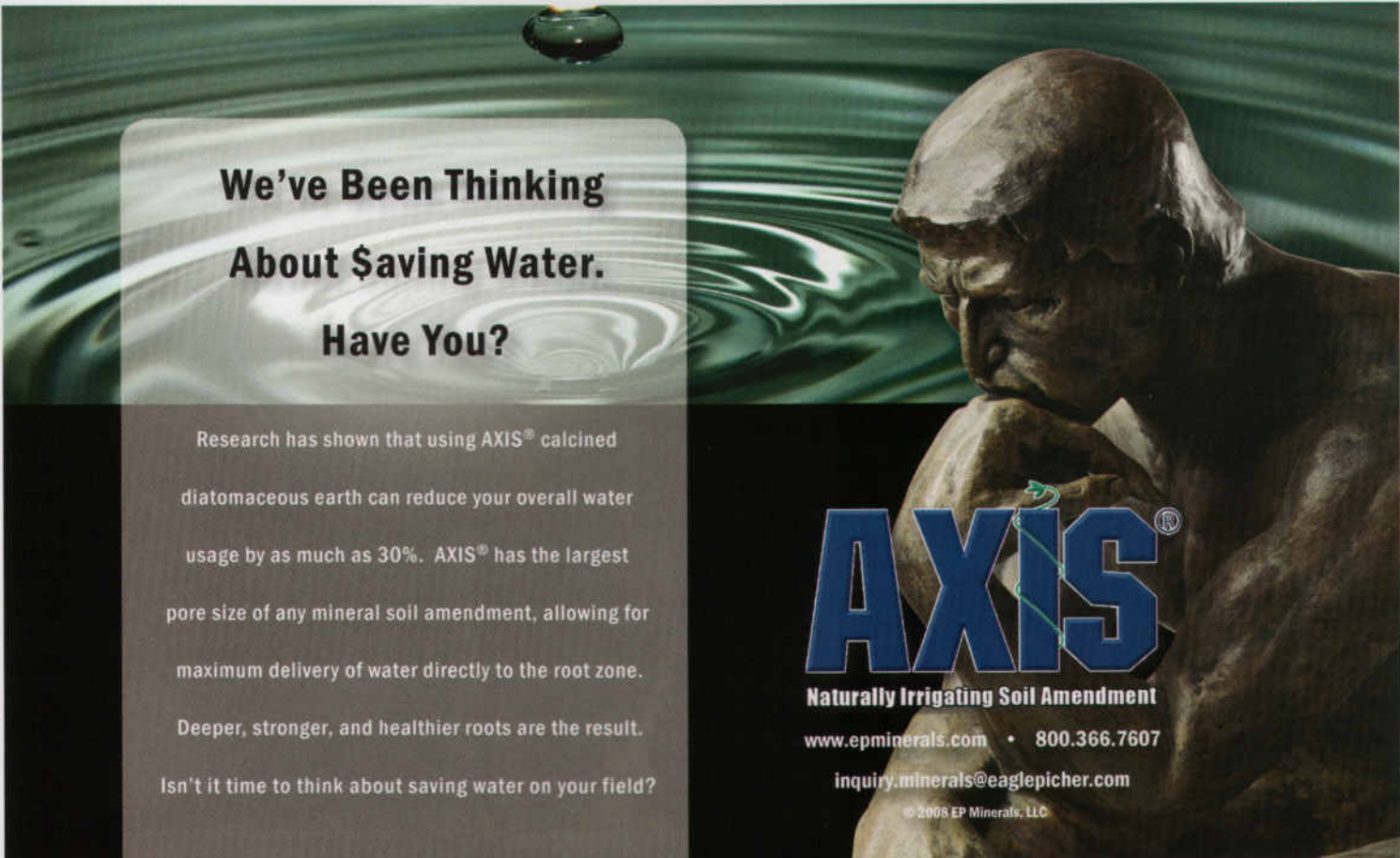
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to not mow. The first area was too small to get a riding mower in and in order to save time and labor they planted the fine fescue blend hoping to start a new aesthetic for areas like this.

• Installed Flexi-pave instead of concrete or blacktop on two small pads and one sidewalk. Flexi-pave is a recycled tire product that works like cement but allows water through. Bought an Electric Toro Workman as a work cart for our athletic fields. Randall believes healthy turf is more environmentally friendly than thin sparse turf so he is trying to gradually improve the overall turf canopy especially on his fields. The thicker and denser the turf, the less bare ground there is, and that means less evaporation of water and cooler turf in the summer. Recycling and purchasing every recycled product they can. Examples include old concrete as fill, tree branches, leaves, paper, metal, cardboard, plastics, and recycled bike racks, etc.)

In our next article we'll meet a passionate turf manager who has developed an incredible plan to meet and address green issues on the campus where he works. ■

Kevin I. Meredith, CSFM is turf manager for the National Soccer Hall of Fame, Oneonta, NY.



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