

## Catching a Trend on the Grow



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Erosion control the right call at the right time for this North Dakota outfit

### **Monster Lawn and Hydroseeding**

**Owner:** Chris Kurtz

**Founded:** 2001

**Headquarters:** Devils Lake, N.D.

**Markets:** All of North Dakota

**Services:** Installing erosion control products such as silt fence, floating silt curtain, fiber rolls & erosion control blankets; seeding, hydroseeding, straw mulching and soil preparation/grading; and commercial and residential landscaping

**Employees:** 25 (in-season)

**Website:** [www.monsterlawn.net](http://www.monsterlawn.net)

Changing the direction of a company is not always easy or successful, but when North Dakotan Chris Kurtz transitioned his landscaping firm into erosion control, the timing couldn't have been better.

"There's been a much greater emphasis on this topic the past few years in the state, because environmental requirements have been stepped up. To some degree it has been difficult to be in the erosion control business because programs are being developed on the fly. However, the state does have lots of infrastructure needs and lots of money," Kurtz says.

Six years ago, Kurtz began working in erosion control and today he figures his company ranks in the top three in North Dakota for gross sales.

“Managing growth has been a challenge,” he says, “but we have been able to develop a strategy that relies more on versatile equipment than on labor that is becoming more difficult to hire and retain. Overall, however, it’s a good time to be in this business.”

## **Replacing labor with equipment**

Kurtz started his Devils Lake, N.D., company in 2001, primarily doing hydroseeding for new residential construction. Most of the work took place in the Fargo area, and in order to get noticed around the state’s largest city, he created a unique company name, Monster Lawn and Hydroseeding, and a logo featuring a kid-friendly drawing of a furry monster. “It got us attention as we moved our equipment around town,” he says.

After two years working in the Fargo market, operations shifted back to Devils Lake where Kurtz and his crew continued to do hydroseeding and landscaping, along with shoreline restoration.



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Monster Lawn & Hydroseeding was awarded the “Gold Star Excellence in Concrete” from the North Dakota Ready Mix & Concrete Association for this bridge repair project for the ND DOT in Devils Lake, N.D.

“We kept busy, billing \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year. It was a nice business. However, at the time I was 35 years old and began to realize that this type of work was very labor-intensive and finding available help was difficult at times. My wife believed that if I wanted to stay in the business I should look at areas where we could substitute equipment for labor. At the same time, erosion control was growing in importance throughout North Dakota, especially in areas where flooding regularly occurred. It seemed like a good match for our company.”

## **Learning the ropes**

He spent a great deal of time during 2006 researching the industry, including how to receive notification of job opportunities, bidding strategy and operating procedures.

One of the first things Kurtz discovered about the business was higher wages made it easier to attract and keep good help. The work is regulated by state and federal guidelines which mandate pay scales.

While Kurtz already owned several pieces of equipment, including a hydroseeder, a skid steer loader, a tractor, a single-axle dump truck, two 1-ton pickups with trailers and an assortment of attachments, his new business required even more.

“We dove in head-first, investing in straw mulchers, more tractors and

additional skid steer loaders. It was quite a capital commitment, but necessary to have a chance to compete in this field," he says.



[Click photo to enlarge.](#)

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONSTER LAWN AND HYDROSEEDING.

The first year he bid on four jobs and got two of them. "That was enough at the start because we just wanted to get our feet wet," he says. "We were just flying by the seat of our pants. I wasn't overly nervous, but was definitely anxious."

Of the first two projects, one was a state park dam repair near the Canadian border and the other involved a pumping station outlet to help control flooding at Devils Lake. Both jobs consisted of turf reinforcement mats and erosion control blankets.

## **Record it and keep moving**

Kurtz not only successfully completed these jobs, but equally important was his decision to place a high value on recordkeeping.

"At the conclusion of these jobs we were able to cross-reference our time studies with the bidding program we initially developed," he notes. "We had real field numbers to compare with our office numbers. Our systems continued to evolve as we went forward because we had reliable information based on cost coding and tracking. That process is critical in this business and it has paid huge dividends over the years."

Although there is always competition for jobs, Kurtz says he doesn't pay much attention to what others are doing. "Instead of following along with others, we have always relied on our own operating procedures."

One important factor in his success, says Kurtz, is hands-on management. "I am usually at every project, as evidenced by the 10,000 miles a month that I put on my pickup. I don't like it when people tell me something cannot be done or there is only one way to do a job, so I want to be involved at every site to make sure we are doing what we said we would do. Our company has a history of completing very difficult projects. At times we are called as the third player in the game because the first two firms said something could not be done."



[Click photo to enlarge.](#)

Here an operator is using a Bobcat with soil conditioner attachment to prepare a seed bed as part of a 22-acre repair job in Minot for the North Dakota DOT. The project required seeding, straw mulching and installing 13,000 linear feet of erosion control fiber rolls.

Among the equipment Kurtz relies on to work efficiently across the state, from the Red River Valley on the east to the booming oil fields in the west, are several pieces of Bobcat equipment, which includes three compact track loaders, two skid steer loaders, a compact excavator and an assortment of

attachments. Four of the machines are the new, advanced M-Series models.

"We use these machines in every facet of our full-service business, including installing turf reinforcement mats, erosion control blankets and silt fences. One of the best examples of substituting equipment for labor is the silt fence installer attachment. It's a big time-saver that eliminates hand-digging and trenching. That type of machine efficiency is the reason I have never sent out a crew without a loader," he says.

## **Spectacular growth**

By the second year in business, Monster Lawn had a 50-50 mix between private and government work. Erosion control for cell phone tower firms and pipeline companies helped boost income along with Kurtz's initial projects for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



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Chris Kurtz is hands on and makes it a point to be a part of every project, which is a big deal considering he puts 10,000 miles a month on his pickup during his busy season

Last year the company was doing so well, with about \$3 million worth of business, that Kurtz decided not to renew any of his snow removal contracts.

"For several years commercial snow work was a significant portion of our income, but we now have the equipment and experience to continue erosion work throughout the winter, at least when the weather is somewhat mild," he says.

"We now use our snow removal equipment to clear our work areas, use hydraulic breakers on our compact loaders to break through the frost, install perimeter controls and lay down our products. Keeping up with the volume of erosion control projects is more important than doing snow removal right now."

Giving his full attention to erosion control projects is certainly necessary, says Kurtz, as the business can be risky at times.

"When we first arrive at a site nobody is usually ready because they know so little about the job. We have to establish perimeter controls before anyone starts moving dirt. When others are finished doing their work we come back to re-establish the turf. A lot of coordination is necessary to successfully complete a job."

Kurtz believes the erosion control business in North Dakota is operating at a panic level, a situation he figures will settle down to a comfortable level over the next five years.

"Right now we're doing 150 to 200 jobs annually," he says. "That means every three or four days we are moving on to the next project, constantly juggling equipment from one job site to another. "Believe me, this industry is not a marathon, it's a sprint."

Paul Posel has been an editor of company-sponsored magazines in a variety of industries for more than four decades.