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One company looks overseas to create revenue

Bob Arello is president of Hydrograss Technologies, a hydroseeding company headquartered in North Oxford, Mass., with another operation in Sarasota, Fla. When Hydrograss Technologies employees hydroseed bare soil, Arello knows that the job must demonstrate success within the first 60 days in order for maintenance to go well. Most of what his company does is then maintained by another entity, such as a government agency, or is allowed to grow naturally. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, we walk away from these jobs looking good," he says.



One of the company's five stainless steel hydroseeding machines.

Hydrograss Technologies began in Massachusetts in 1993, and Arello opened up the Florida location in 2002, taking advantage of the opportunity to do hydroseeding for the many golf courses under construction at the time. In order to ensure that clients get the best products, Arello tests organic and

chemical products on test plots at his Florida site and creates his own mixes.



Hydroseeding the Fire
Golf Course in Dubai.

"I have these mixing kits and I put them down at different rates. We use different areas, different slopes," he says. "I find the scientific part very intriguing. I love seeing how we can get the seed to grow faster and quicker."

"I've always been on the green side of things over the years; I've had a lot of background and history going to school. It makes a big difference just being in this industry for a long time and knowing a lot of facts besides how to grow grass," says Arello, who studied soils and botany at Utah State University.

"I like having success in growing grass and stabilizing slopes," says Arello. "We always try to find fixes. A lot of stuff becomes logical in terms of common sense: how to stabilize, how to grow grass, how to do it right. If it's done right, normally you're going to be successful."

"For a lot of companies, the key is a great product line," he says. "Besides being in the service industry, we like to have a little edge. The competition is on the products. We're trying to create new products that will make a difference and give us a head start so we can make more money up front."

One challenge for the company is dealing with transportation department specifications that are sod-driven.

"It's because of the years of difficulty in trying to get turf established on highway projects," says Arello. "The only way they've had success with that is bringing in sod because of the weather conditions. For a few weeks, it'll be dry as a bone, but before that there would be 8-inch rain events every day."

Arello also finds warm-season grasses are tough to germinate, but he's been successful in pretreating seeds for pregermination. "We're getting grass in five days," he says. "That's enabled us to have some of these engineers and architects look at hydroseeding in a different light now, because we're getting faster establishment of grass."

"We're able to have the grasses stay in place using some of these special

stabilizing products like the bonded fiber matrix and others from our product line. We make sure our guys are applying it at the right rates, because application is key.

Hydrograss Technologies employs about 15 people at each company location. Arello says it's the equipment that does most of the work, cutting down on the need for labor. "We've got all different-sized machines to tackle different projects," he says. "We've got to pull them through swamps and on golf courses, so we've gotten very versatile."



One of Bob Arello's strategies has been to take his hydroseeding work outside the United States to keep revenues coming as the U.S. bounces back to economic stability. Networking with a business contact in golf course construction, Hydrograss Technologies netted work in the Middle East to hydroseed golf course projects.



One of the Hydrograss Technologies' six T330 hydroseeding machines.

The company's extensive equipment list includes: three Apex hydroseeding units, including two with a 4,000-gallon capacity and a 5,000-gallon capacity stainless steel unit; 1,200-gallon, 700-gallon and 450-gallon Kincaid hydroseeding units; John Deere tractors; dust application trucks, a Kincaid hydroseeding machine with special floatation tires for use on golf courses, access to sky cranes for aerial hydroseeding; and mixing tanks and pumps.

Most of the company's clients are in the commercial, industrial and

government sectors, and Hydrograss does very little work for the residential sector. "Homeowners are conserving money because they don't know which way the economy's going, so we've been doing pipeline projects, landfill work and some economic stimulus funding work," Arello notes.

Because Hydrograss Technologies focuses more on turf establishment rather than maintenance, it means Arello must be constantly on the lookout for new work because his company does not maintain what it establishes. Sometimes, nature provides the work: a wildfire necessitates post-disaster hydroseeding, flooding calls for hydroseeding work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build up dikes for better protection. One of Arello's strategies has been to take work outside the United States to keep revenues flowing as the United States struggles to get back to economic stability. Networking with a business contact in golf course construction, Arello netted work in the Middle East hydroseeding golf course projects. Among those projects:

- New playing surfaces at Abu Dhabi's two biggest stadiums, which hosted the FIFA Club World Cup UAE 2009 in December, and the renovation of seven other pitches across the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Laser equipment was used to produce an even pitch gradient and Sea Dwarf paspalum grass was selected for its minimal watering requirements.
- At the Yas Island Golf Course in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Hydrograss Technologies used Flexterra for hydroseeding a Kyle Phillips-designed golf course, which spans 910,000 square meters.
- Using GeoMatrix SS and GeoPerm shipped from the United States, as well as a contingent of equipment, Hydrograss Technologies provided hydroseeding services at the construction of the Greg Norman-designed Fire Golf Course at Jumeirah Golf Estates in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

On the surface, hydroseeding world-class golf courses in the areas such as Dubai may seem like an attractive job, but there were challenges with logistics, such as the permits that were needed, the equipment had to be shipped, etc.

As the economy started its downturn around the world, Hydrograss Technologies was getting tapped out financially while completing some of the work. "I didn't think I was going to get paid," says Arello, adding that getting all of his company's outstanding invoices completely paid was "a long haul." He ultimately changed strategies and before doing new work he started requesting a large percentage of the money upfront.

"You've just got to sacrifice a lot of things," Arello says of taking jobs overseas. "I went out there and stayed with the crews for the duration to make sure everything stayed fine. On another job I ended up going out there, but lived in a work camp with several thousand Indians and Bengalis. The conditions weren't bad; they did a very nice job considering the amount of people."

Arello finds his biggest challenge is to stay profitable. "It's creating work to keep everybody busy," he says. "The numbers have been coming down because

the jobs aren't out there. You're not losing, but you're not making it. One of my biggest goals today is consistency because we have a big overhead. We have people working in the field and we have to keep them busy."

Carol Brzozowski is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has written extensively about environmental issues for numerous trade journals for more than a decade. She resides in Coral Springs, Fla.