

Mowing Strategies



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

How to keep on schedule after weather-related disruptions

Photos by Steve Trusty.

Much of the region faced a wet season. Many days were too wet for mowing. And, even on days when the sun was shining, the turf was often wet and the soils were soggy.

Most lawn service companies made adjustments in their preplanned schedules to attempt to mow all the properties of their existing clients. Strategies designed to accomplish the same amount of work in fewer days may be successful for the short term. It's much harder to accomplish when difficult conditions persist for weeks and months.

Mowing clients, both residential and commercial, pay for the service because they want their lawns to look well groomed all the time, without having to invest their time and energy into making that happen. Most expect the mowing to take place on a specific day, and often at a set time during that day.



While part-time or temporary crew members may be added to crews to save time while catching up on missed mowing, an experienced mower operator should be assigned to this area because of potential problems: a hillside, a fenced section of lawn and landscape features bordered by turf.



Clumping is a problem when rain delays mowing and the grass is long. Clumps of grass on top of the lawn surface are unsightly when green, and even more so when they turn brown.

Missed mowing strategies

While clients generally understand that crews can't mow during a downpour, many expect their properties to be first on the mowing schedule when the weather clears. It doesn't matter to them that the crew that mows their property on one day has a full schedule of other properties to be mowed on the other days of the week.

First missed, first mowed sounds good in theory, but generates the greatest number of complaints in practice. When crews hit the missed accounts first, they will disrupt the scheduled mowing for that day, thus putting more accounts on the "missed list," which then move to the first-mowed list, disrupting another day's schedule.

Many lawn care services have found the extended day strategy the most effective in handling missed accounts. The same crews cover the properties they have missed, but mow the accounts before or after their already scheduled properties for the day have been mowed. The crew also may work on a weekend day to fit in all the missed

properties. This strategy puts the mowing in the hands of those already familiar with the property, and it requires no additional equipment. The downside is it puts extra stress on the crew members, and working longer hours may make them less effective overall.

When equipment and personnel allow it, splitting crews can be a workable strategy for covering missed accounts. For some companies, an existing crew and its equipment are divided between two sites, so the work at each site does take longer, but both clients are being served.



When weather-related missed mowings add up, it's easy to slip up on some of the little details, such as scalped berms like this one.

Other companies split the crew, with a lead person, regular crew members and some of the equipment on each team. Extra equipment and part-time or temporary personnel are added to each team so that the size of the crew at each site is not reduced. This strategy puts some personnel familiar with the property on each site. If the additional personnel are experienced with the equipment and the company's operational standards, the work can be accomplished fairly close to the time required by the regular crew. If the additional personnel are temporary workers with little experience with the equipment, more time will be required at each site. The downside is the extra cost for equipment and personnel. However, if those costs are balanced by a higher level of client satisfaction and client retention, they may be worthwhile.

They also can bring new clients. When one lawn care company consistently finds ways to get the lawns mowed despite challenging weather conditions, those whose properties are not getting the same level of service are sure to

notice.

Whatever strategy is used, it will be even more effective if the client is notified during the contract negotiations that this is the lawn service company's standard procedure for weather-related missed mowing, and the client understands and accepts those terms when signing the contract. A proactive approach in addition to that can eliminate the majority of no-mow complaints, such as a courtesy call to the client immediately following the first missed mowing to assure them that their property is on the revised schedule and will be mowed as soon as possible.

Attention to detail

When weather-related missed mowings add up, and crews are stretched to the max, it's easy to slip up on some of the little details of a mowing job. Unfortunately, it's often when the regular mowing schedule has been disrupted that clients are the most likely to notice those problems and complain about them. A few minutes spent reminding crews of this will help them sharpen their attention to detail. Some companies find it beneficial to provide a checklist for one crew member to review while walking the property before leaving the site.

Clumping is one of the most frequent problems when rain delays mowing and the grass is long. Clumps of cut grass left on the surface of the lawn look unsightly right away, and even worse when the clumps turn brown. It's time-consuming to collect and dispose of the clippings during these situations, but if the clippings are excessive that may be the best approach. If mowing decks can be equipped for more effective recycling, that may eliminate the problem. In many instances, where clumping is only a problem in a few spots, a light touch with a leaf rake will disperse those clippings into the lawn with no adverse effects and little additional time.

On commercial properties with a large expanse of lawn, clumping may only be a problem in high-visibility areas, such as along walkways or the parking lot. If large sections of the property are highly visible, a brush or drag mat pulled behind the mower might eliminate clumping with no additional time expenditure.



When crews are stressed and pushed for time while trying to get back on schedule, it's easy to forget to trim the tall grass around landscape features, but missing this one step affects the overall impression of the quality of the mowing job.

Obviously, safe operation is the first thing to stress during any training session, and no employee should be allowed to operate a piece of equipment unless he or she has been thoroughly trained on it. Crew leaders still need to be vigilant about the assignments they give to the mower operators with less experience than their regular staff. Some areas are especially problem prone, such as hillsides, fenced sections of the yard and the strips of lawn

bordering landscape features.

Scalping on berms is a common problem for inexperienced mower operators, and even some long-time operators if the ground is even slightly wet. Because berms usually are a landscape feature in a high-visibility area, the damage not only makes a bad impression, but also frequently prompts complaints. Many companies prefer to use small, walk-behind trim mowers operated by their most experienced crew members to avoid scalping berms.

The finishing touches may be the most skipped of all. Neglecting to sweep or blow grass clippings from walks, driveways, steps and patios will always be noticed by the client, especially if someone tracks those clippings into the home or business. Forgetting to trim tall grass at the edges of landscape features, such as flowerbeds, fences or rock walls, is obvious to the client and to everyone else viewing that area of the property.

Focusing on details even more closely during challenging seasons will enhance your company's reputation and attract more clients.

Suz Trusty is a partner in Trusty & Associates, a communications and market research firm located in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

“