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Turfmasters finds its niche amid the downturn



The dirt and sod has dropped substantially here, causing earthquake-looking "ravines" to open up and the wall to drop even further. The house at the top of the slope is in jeopardy. Inclometers were installed at the beginning of the project to monitor slope movement. *Photos courtesy of Turfmasters.*

An increasing number of regulations spawned by the Clean Water Act and other federal and state-based regulations means the need for more base services from those who tend turf.

Case in point: Turfmasters, located in Moscow Mills, Mo. The company's list of services reads like a menu in a restaurant.

Turfmasters specializes in the development, construction and maintenance of various facets of seeding, erosion control, bio-stabilization, wetland construction and mitigation work, lake and stream bank stabilization and mitigation, high-bank stabilization, native riparian establishment, native prairie grass and wildflower establishment, bio-detention swales and basins, gabion wall rock placement, gabion and reno mat construction, and installation and maintenance of best management practices (BMP) to comply with the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Program (SWPPP) and Clean Water Act.

The company offers their services to clients in Missouri, southern Iowa and southern Illinois, and has grown significantly since it first began.



A substantial drop in this slope is evidenced by the wall that has dropped approximately 6 to 8 feet, as well as the dirt "ledges" caused by the earth shifting, moving and buckling as it slides further down the slope.

"I started off simply seeding and sodding," says Steve Parisi, the company's founder and president. "It was pretty basic work: sod work, hydroseeding and mechanical seeding. It was mostly on development sites and for public works projects. There's always a need to control sites and control soils. It wasn't very long before we were figuring out ways to do that."

The company executes its work through utilizing silt fence, conventional seeding, commercial seeding, hydroseeding and sod, straw blowing, erosion control blankets, turf reinforcement mats and other products.

Client projects include site development, general contractor construction, commercial and residential site cleanup and maintenance, retaining walls, landscaping, French drains and yard drains, paver stones, irrigation systems, rain gardens and electrical conduit construction.

About 10 years ago, Parisi became interested in becoming a certified professional in erosion and sediment control (CPESC). "The industry was coming along pretty strong then, but in the St. Louis area, you still

couldn't get the customers to pay for it. In the Midwest, we're behind the times; we're always behind the West Coast and East Coast," he says. Parisi says that when Phase II of the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) was implemented in 2003, work really started to pick up.

"All of these people started agreeing to do best management practices and take care of their sites better because the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Natural Resources in Missouri was starting to hammer down on people," he says. "With my CPESC designation and with our experience, business really took off. We made a lot of headway in erosion and sediment control."



Notice the blue inclinometer between the soil engineers legs. There were originally several inclinometers installed on the slope and one on top of the slope by the house. All of them sheared off from the slope moving except the one by the house. It is being watched very closely, along with a new one that was recently installed on the other side of the house.

That is, until the recession hit. Like most companies in the industry, Turfmasters was affected by the recession and is endeavoring to reinvent itself in the wake of it. "Back when the building boom was going on, it was all we could do to keep seed, straw and silt fence in stock, because we had crews all over the place doing all of that basic vegetation and BMP work," Parisi says. The recession has actually presented the company with another niche market: providing erosion control on sites where construction work has stopped and helping the site owners stay in compliance. "We are working at a lot of the sites where banks are taking over or some other developers or builders bought from other developers that were bankrupt," says Parisi. "We are helping them button things up, get compliant, clean up their sites, fix erosion, fix sediment and vegetate them." His company is also pursuing projects that are being financed through federal stimulus funding.

Every day presents a different challenge, and it seems that lately the company is mitigating a lot of slope failures. Turfmasters had been working to fix a slope failure on a site now owned by a bank after the builder walked away from it more than a year ago. The EPA had levied fines in excess of \$130,000 at the site. "We get called in on some tricky stuff," Parisi says. "This slope has basically turned into liquid, much like on a smaller scale of what you'd see in California." The integrity of residential structures was being jeopardized by the slope failure. "We're going to have to mitigate the soils that are on the site by excavating it, processing it and making it usable fill again, so we can go back and rebuild the slope," says Parisi. "We've got to do that without losing the houses on top of the hill." Parisi also was considering doing shoring and piling as part of the site mitigation.



The housing crisis has actually presented Turfmasters with a niche market: providing erosion control on sites where construction work has stopped due to bankruptcy, etc., and helping the site owners remain in compliance.

With all of the different types of work the company is engaged in, and in an effort to keep up with changing needs over time, Turfmasters' success is rooted, in part, in the ongoing employee training that is key in operating a diversified company. Not only does every employee have to learn how to perform new techniques as clients need them, but being able to be flexible as the times dictate and offering clients more umbrella services helps the company compete in the current marketplace. "We are really big on training; I've spent a lot of money in training guys over the years," Parisi says. He's paid for employees to attend local and national International Erosion Control Association events. Sometimes he'll even set up booths at trade shows and give talks as a CPESC.

Although Parisi will hire people who have no background in the industry, he likes to have some with experience. "Having a Class A Commercial Drivers License [CDL] is very important because we're having people drive trucks and trailers that fall into the governing authority of federal motor safety carrier laws," he points out. His company will help employees get their Class A CDL by demonstrating how to drive the trucks and sending them through Missouri Department of Transportation certifications. "We do a lot of in-

house training," Parisi says. "I find that that's the best. We'll pair the guys we get in here with more experienced guys just to show them how to do things on a daily basis."

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