

Part 3

Form a Coalition

What Is a Coalition?

A coalition is very different from an association.

Associations unite businesses with similar interests—growers and landscape contractors, for instance. Associations allow competitors and other groups within the industry to network, establish industry-wide practices, improve as professionals, promote industry innovation and elevate the industry.

Coalitions align members from various industries, organizations and businesses, such as irrigation contractors, turf growers, landscape contractors and greenhouse growers, on a single platform. Coalitions connect people who share common concerns, interests and a desire to work together toward specific short- and long-term goals.

As green industry businesses, we share concerns for our water resources and the environment. We also expect to have fair water-use rules and regulations. To achieve our goals, we must put aside our differences, emphasize our similarities and form coalitions. A coalition formed from a diverse group lends credibility and strength to a cause, and it can influence public perception and policies.

How Involved Is the Green Industry?

Green industry businesses are major contributors to communities around the world, throughout the country and in our own neighborhoods. Green industry professionals, including owners of nurseries, turfgrass sod farms, greenhouses, garden centers and companies that manufacture equipment, irrigation systems and other products, have a tremendous vested interest in water issues. So do landscape architects and landscape or irrigation designers and contractors.

As a \$39.6 billion industry nationwide, a coalition with an economic impact of this magnitude, even on the local level, should play an integral role in decisions governing water use. But that is not always the case. Despite their reliance on abundant water, green industry businesses often fail to adequately represent themselves in any water-related, decision-making process.

Here is what a member survey of the American Nursery and Landscape Association revealed...

77% of respondents said they have *never* participated in their local water board.

That means only 23% have actively participated! The survey also found that only 43% of respondents have ever attended a water meeting, but some have invested more than 100 hours in water meetings to give the green industry a voice with decision makers. To date, too few members indicate direct involvement with government leaders and water purveyors who make the decisions on water restrictions. This lack of action has real costs.

Industry Impact

Green coalitions formed at a grassroots level can and should have an impact on water-related decisions. They can help to...

- strengthen industry representation
- influence or initiate public policy
- build a foundation for water conservation efforts
- educate the public on the benefits of water conservation and the importance of green spaces.

Andy Hull, president of EnviroNetwork Consulting in Woodstock, Ga., said, “By being involved in various state committees, we can voice our opinion and influence what happens in the landscape area. The state agencies have figured out that we’re on their side and that we know what we’re talking about. From that involvement, we have influenced permitting procedures and processes affecting the direction of water quality and quantity.”

“We have the chance to be the largest, number one contributor to reducing water consumption and cleaning up the water. At the same time, because of the landscape systems and infiltrations, our expertise and technology is going to be huge. We’re smack dab in the middle of it.”

Who’s Listening?

Who will hear this collective voice? In your community, you must first identify the players whose primary concern is water regulation. Chances are, your water board is handled at the county or municipal level, and your coalition’s key focus should be on this important governing body. In addition, any of the following could be key players:

- local elected officials
- local regulatory authorities
- state representatives
- environmental groups
- your state department of environment and/or natural resources
- local or state garden clubs.

Become a Player

To become an effective player, you must first get involved on a personal level:

- Educate yourself on water-use issues—learn all you can, and then educate others, including the ultimate decision-makers.
- Get into the game—attend public meetings or spend time with individual water policy officials in your area. Decision makers want—and value—your input. Don’t wait until there is a crisis.

Find Out How Decisions Are Made

Do a little legwork to find out what infrastructure is already in place. Find out...

- what laws determine who has access to water and how decisions are made
- which group has ultimate authority to make and enforce water-use policies
- what process is used to allocate, reallocate, price or control water use
- what are the specific requirements, if any, to attend meetings and receive notices
- which groups control fresh and recycled water. (Recycled water will play an increasingly significant role in our overall water supply. Knowing who administers it—and how—is vitally important.)

Research the Players

Find out who the real players are in the water-use arena.

- What group controls the area's water? Is it local, state, regional or national? Is it an elected or appointed group? Is it a for-profit or not-for-profit monopoly that is either public or quasi-public?
- Are the visible "decision makers" elected, appointed or hired to serve on the controlling group?
- Who are the "promoters" that quietly, but effectively, influence the initiation or result of water policies?
- Who are your allies? Can they be called upon to assist when needed? Could they include other green industry professionals, gardening and homeowner associations or the media?
- Who are your "opponents?" Do they include anti-growth advocates or extreme environmentalists? Could they be water regulators, land developers or financial institutions that support severe landscape water restrictions as a means to expand their own market interests?
- Who are the most credible or expert "witnesses" that can help support your position? Do you have access to university researchers or industry personnel who can independently substantiate your claims and provide additional insights or scientific documentation?

Recognize That Timing Is Critical

- Develop a working “radar” that will alert you in advance of possible water decision movements. Begin by requesting advanced agendas, attending meetings, reading newspapers and following any mini-trends that relate to weather conditions, construction or infrastructure breakdowns.
- Recognize the value of being “first” or “last” in the decision-making process. People tend to have better recall of, and are more influenced by, the first or last things they hear or see. If you have an opportunity, be the first to raise an issue, offer a solution, write or speak on an important issue. Failing that, work toward being the last panelist, the last word, the final authority.

Understand the Specifics of Current Water Issues

- Analyze the current circumstances by determining if the actions under consideration are for a crisis situation, long-term problems or short-term conditions with long-term consequences.
- Familiarize yourself with decision-making timetables, especially those relating to meeting schedules and decision deadlines. Keep in mind that some decisions are made before the meeting ever begins.
- Determine the scope of the problem so you can be prepared to offer suitable solutions. A serious but short-lived emergency requires a different approach than a long-term problem.
- Stay current on all water users, including agricultural, industrial, business and residential. Gather facts about the water use by each segment. If you do not have figures readily available, you may be able to get them from the water-governing group. Continue to probe for more details, and critically examine the data you are given to ensure that it truly reports what it implies and that the “facts” are properly used.
- Be prepared to address outdoor water use by having scientifically documented information that relates to the actual plant need vs. common watering practices. Ensure that comparisons between plant groups are based on science, not anecdotal observations.
- Assemble information about the environmental benefits of landscape and outdoor water use. Prepare to report on the many aesthetic, functional and recreational benefits—as well as the economic impact of individual landscapes that can be lost if they are not maintained at a survival level.
- Document the economic impact of landscaping with figures from your own operation (e.g., number of employees, payroll, taxes and purchases) as well as related statistics for such areas as sports fields and parks, golf courses and nursery and garden centers.

Offer Practical Solutions

Offer one or more positive solutions to address identified critical water needs. Generally speaking, but depending on the situation, the following resolutions have proven effective:

- Pre-crisis planning is the most effective approach because it allows for proactive initiatives and a longer lead-time for implementation. If, for example, the current water delivery system is out dated or undersized for the growing population, it may take years and even voter-approved authority to improve or expand the system.
- Stepped or phased-in water-use restrictions can be developed in non-crisis times, with the public and businesses informed of each phase so they can plan and respond appropriately.
- Consumer education programs that teach indoor and outdoor water conservation techniques can be very helpful. Stay up-to-date and share your knowledge of new water-saving and efficiency-improving techniques. If funding is not available from one source, a coalition of businesses, civic organizations and governmental groups could form.
- Water allocation budgets that fix amounts, not prescribed, or prohibit water use allow individuals to make personal choices. Mandated or prohibited water-use regulations take away personal freedoms.
- “Block water” pricing increases the cost for every X-gallons of water at a higher rate than the previous block. The rate of increase between blocks can also rise with usage. This pricing elasticity raises individual awareness of water use and results in conservation, while maintaining personal choice.

Questions Water-Policy Officials Should Be Prepared to Answer

Ultimately, enlisting the public in a successful water-conservation program requires water-policy officials to be able to deliver on the promises they make—even if those promises are only implied.

Question 1

Are the landscape and turf water-conservation goals short-term, long-term or indefinite, and are they expected to become more restrictive?

Question 2

Have the proposed conservation programs proven to be effective in saving water, or like some xeriscape programs, have they actually resulted in using more water?

Question 3

Will the proposed landscape water conservation efforts result in creating heat islands, which require increased energy consumption for cooling?

Question 4

Will there be any negative impacts on the environment and ecosystem as a result of the proposed water-conservation efforts?

Question 5

What will be the economic impacts (positive and negative) of these conservation efforts on home values, businesses and jobs?

Question 6

What will happen to the water that is conserved? Where will it go, and how will it be used?

Question 7

Will individuals maintain personal choice and individual responsibility when the proposed conservation efforts are implemented?

How to Build a Coalition

Building a coalition is as much of an investment in your future as training employees, purchasing new equipment or applying new technology. Drought and water management issues will continue to confront us. Long-term answers need to evolve and short-term goals need to be met to address these issues.

By forming local and regional coalitions, green industry businesses can be more effective and accomplish more than a single entity working alone. Coalitions can multiply your resources (i.e., funding, experience, influence), add credibility to your mission and significantly enhance your ability to influence public policy and opinion.

Tip: Building coalition support has been key to the success of many local green communities nationwide. To see a case study, go to www.TurfGrassSod.org or www.LawnInstitute.com. Click on “Water Right” and proceed to “Case Study 10: Communicating Water Conservation to a Community.”

Begin

Now is the best time to start a green industry coalition in your area. You do not need to be the group’s ultimate leader, but if you initiate the idea of unity, other enthusiastic and dedicated professionals will step forward. During this initial phase, determine your primary focus and define your goals so you can continue recruiting participants.

Start with one telephone call to a vendor, supplier, grower or contractor to introduce the idea of forming a coalition of green industry businesses in your area. Soon, you will form a small, core planning group, and your organization will begin to take shape.

Diversify

With water conservation at the forefront of everyone’s concern, we must bridge our differences and build relationships with others who share our desire to enhance and preserve the environment, educate the public and continue to grow within the local community. Collective knowledge equals amplified power, and to harness the influence and power of your coalition, you must recognize the individual skills, resources and expertise that each member brings to the group.

10 Steps to Jumpstart Your Coalition

Step 1 – Identify Potential Partners

Your prime prospects are organizations that share your interests in water conservation, industry preservation and positive, productive relationships with elected officials. This is an inclusive exercise, so invite fellow green businesses from down the street and across the state to participate. While some of these businesses may be your biggest competitors, don't let that stop you from seeing the bigger picture.

An existing drought may have more impact on some geographic areas of your region than others. Increase your coalition's representative base and amplify your power and collective voice by including potential members from every corner of your state.

Step 2 – Recruit Members

Think outside the box. Put aside all preconceived notions about other green businesses and recognize the wide range of contributions that each business and segment of the industry can make to the coalition effort.

Remember: You need to have a variety of green businesses in your coalition. Otherwise, you could appear to be representing the sole interests of one select group.

Invite all businesses, large and small. The larger ones can help offset manpower or budgetary concerns, while smaller businesses will help build key resources. Be sure to include experienced business owners as well as new entrepreneurs to broaden the base of experience with enthusiasm.

Remind those who are reluctant to join that a water crisis can occur at anytime, without warning. If they are waiting for a crisis to get involved, they will be too late to be effective. Proactive involvement from the start can help ensure the success of the coalition now and the well-being of our businesses in the future.

Step 3 – Target Expertise

When you talk to potential partners, ask about the assets they can bring to the coalition:

- experience
- philosophy
- internal resources
- community influence
- access to legislators, the water board or media.

Your core group should make a conscious decision to look for specific experience when you approach other businesses. For example, look for members that have in-house or vendor-supported PR, advertising or graphic design capabilities. A business that has a Web site or IT staff can help communicate a group message, post minutes or disseminate information. Still others will be very involved in their professional associations and have access to a variety of valuable resources.

Step 4 – Schedule a Meeting

Choose a central location and convenient time for your meeting, and plan your agenda. Include time for everyone to get acquainted, inviting the potential members to introduce themselves, identify their business and voice any positive or negative concerns they may have about forming a coalition. Mail, fax or e-mail your agenda ahead of time to communicate the focus of the meeting.

Make sure you assign action steps throughout the meeting to give everyone a good reason to return and continue the coalition dialogue. You might distribute the latest water level reports or sanctions or an analysis of the latest green bills in front of your state legislature. At the end of the meeting, review the action items, persons responsible and deadlines. Be sure to schedule the next meeting to maintain momentum.

Step 5 – Select the Leadership

A board should be the decision-making body of your organization. Depending on the size of your coalition, you should choose three to six representatives—with as much diversity as possible. Include growers, landscape contractors, irrigation specialists and others. Your board should develop a preliminary plan on behalf of the entire coalition. It is generally necessary for boards to meet outside of scheduled meetings involving the entire coalition.

Step 6 – Appoint a Chair

Selecting a chairperson is a very important step toward launching a successful coalition. The ideal candidate must be able to oversee the coalition’s strategic mission and help steer financial, functional and programming activities.

Strong leadership skills, organization and follow-through are essential. Ideally, the position should be held one to two years before a new person is chosen. The chair may not necessarily be the coalition spokesperson.

Step 7 – Draft a Plan

The board’s first order of business is to draft a preliminary outline that communicates, qualifies and quantifies what the coalition hopes to accomplish.

The essentials of an effective plan include the following:

- mission statement
- long- and short-term initiatives
- action plan
- implementation schedule.

Include a timeframe to guide and build momentum for the mission. If your plan includes short- and long-term goals, keep these categories separate and specific.

Note: Mission statements are most effective when kept to one or two simple sentences!

Step 8 – Identify Proficiencies

Coalition members participate at different levels. Some will lead or invest time; others will utilize their own staffs to help implement goals. Still others will only allow the use of their names on a letterhead, while others will act as lobbyists, researchers, data collectors and general supporters.

Step 9 – Communicate with Members

Consistent communication helps make a coalition work. Members may want to receive messages by a variety of methods—mail, e-mail, fax or voice-mail, so determine in advance what is feasible.

Begin to compile your membership list at the first meeting and regularly add the names of any new members. Your list should contain the following basic contact information:

- contact name
- company/organization name
- mailing address
- e-mail
- telephone numbers (home and work)
- fax and cell numbers
- pager number.

While some coalition members may never actually show up for meetings or participate in events, it is imperative that they be kept as well informed as those who do.

Make sure that all coalition partners receive the same information on a timely basis, and establish an emergency communication system—such as a volunteer, board member or calling tree—to keep everyone informed of late-breaking information, such as a vote on pending water sanctions or a piece of volatile legislation.

Step 10 – Solicit Financing

Charges for postage, long-distance telephone and faxing, copying, etc. may only require a small budget that could be voluntarily covered by one or more of the participating businesses. If you need to hire a lobbyist, public relations practitioner, media consultant, Web designer or other support, you may need to solicit financing from all of your members. Contributions may be made on a sliding scale from large to small businesses.

Important: Membership should not be predicated on how much the member can contribute.

One Coalition. One Goal. One Voice.