

# Florida Turfgrass Environmental Research & Education Fund

### Background

The turfgrass industry in Florida has been under attack in recent years by various activist groups that have used sound bites and half-truths to subvert the environmental and economic importance of turf to Florida, and as a basis for bad public policy development. These attacks have been partially successful because the professionalism within our industry is divided among more than 900 golf courses, 7,500 lawn and landscape businesses, as well as numerous sod farms, sports facilities, institutional/residential property managers and uncounted irrigation and equipment suppliers for this nearly \$8 billion industry. University of Florida/IFAS scientists have been attacked as biased and peer-reviewed research has been ignored or misrepresented. Recently, issues have been focused at the local government level where government officials are ill-equipped and ill-trained to make science-based decisions regarding the benefits of turfgrass in the urban environment. Issues include restrictions on sale and use of lawn fertilizers including the establishment of lengthy summer growing-season fertilizer “black-out” periods. In some cases, sod farms, sports facilities and golf courses are granted an exemption from these ordinances, but sentiment clearly exists in the activist community to extend restrictions to all sectors of the turfgrass industry, irrespective of their adherence to codified and widely acclaimed management practices.

The industry strongly believes that education and research are the primary tools that must be used to bring sound scientific practices to bear on these

important environmental issues. The misrepresentation of the environmental importance of turfgrass is not going to stop without a concerted education and research effort that has to reach multiple audiences including the general public, our legislators and regulators, as well as those working within the industry. While there have been and continue to be laudable ad hoc advocacy efforts undertaken by various segments of the turfgrass industry, these research and education efforts need to be funded at levels beyond those contributions that can be made by individuals, large companies or trade organizations working independently. Collaboration and solidarity are essential to success.

To that end, the Florida Turfgrass Association (FTGA) has hosted three summit meetings of a task force which included key turfgrass industry leaders in an effort to formulate a mission statement, which is proposed as follows:

*“To provide the turfgrass industry with a strong public voice; to provide funding for research; to promote turfgrass research, education and outreach; and to advocate for turfgrass with elected officials and regulatory agencies.”*

The task force proposed the creation of the Environmental Research and



Submitted by the Florida  
Turfgrass Association

Education Fund (EREF) and invites all turfgrass industry and allied businesses and associations to join in this effort.

### Proposal

The EREF would be created using a modified “check off” or assessment for the turfgrass industry. Initially a small assessment on fertilizer sales—0.6 percent—is being suggested. It would be set up as a voluntary pass-through charge. It is voluntary in two respects: first, fertilizer companies will be encouraged to participate, but not obligated to. Second, fertilizer customers can elect whether or not to pay the voluntary assessment.

The fund would accept special contributions from industry partners, companies and individuals for added advocacy and research efforts, or to supplement those undertaken with check-off funds.

Participating contributors would get recognition and be promoted to help differentiate participants from non-participants. The program would create a communications vehicle that could communicate to customers the benefits of healthy turfgrass.

FTGA would collect and provide accounting for the overall fund. Financial information by contributors would not be divulged, just the fact that the company is participating. The fund would be segregated and accounted for separately in the FTGA (which is a 501(c)(5), and can therefore lobby), or within the FTGA's research foundation (FTRF, which is a 501(c)(3)). All disbursements from the fund would be determined by an oversight

committee that is comprised of those who contribute to the fund.

## Conclusions

The task force included representatives from 30 turfgrass-related companies (most of which are in the lawn care service industry sector), along with representatives of various state and national turf and golf industry organizations, including FPMA.

The following are the conclusions reached by the task force:

1. The issue of who and how the advocacy fund should be administered was addressed. The task force determined that at this time both a 501(c)(5) and a 501(c)(3) should be used to build the advocacy fund. The two must be in alignment. The 501(c)(3) can house charitable contributions from individuals; the 501(c)(5) is better for standard business deductions.
2. The task force felt that at this time the existing Florida Turfgrass Association (FTGA) and its affiliated

Florida Turfgrass Research Foundation (FTRF) provided a credible, proper and immediate administrative solution. At some point in the future a new structure may be explored if the scope of education and advocacy expand beyond the turfgrass industry.

3. FTGA/FTRF has served as an umbrella funding mechanism for segregated contributions from other collaborating turf-related associations, including the Florida Sod Growers Cooperative, the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association, Florida chapters of the Sports Turf Managers Association and FPMA.
4. Transparency is essential across all potential administrative operations.
5. Initially the purpose of the EREF is to defend turf via an assessment on fertilizer sales. Assessments on other turf industry inputs may be considered at some point in the future—sod, irrigation, pesticides, green fees—as deemed appropriate by their respective industry leadership.
6. The fertilizer assessment will be collected by fertilizer distributors.
7. The assessment is intended to be voluntary, but added to all invoices sent to companies in participating turfgrass industry sectors. It is up to each individual company whether or not to participate. Each participating company can determine how it deals with its customers: add to invoice with an explanation; incur the expense as a cost of business; or increase cost (pass through) to the customer.
8. Funds will be spent on internal education, public education and outreach, political activity (to help elected officials make informed decisions) and on research.
9. The name of the fund is proposed to be the Environmental Research and Education Fund.

For more information on this vital initiative, visit [www.ftga.org/eref](http://www.ftga.org/eref). 

*The Florida Turfgrass Association is dedicated to education, research and the promotion of environmentally responsible, professional and scientifically based management practices for turfgrass. Learn more at [www.ftga.org](http://www.ftga.org).*

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