

Irrigation: Rough Waters Around the Bend[®]

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What if someone tried to stick a target on your back?

Worse yet, what if it stuck and you couldn't get it off?

I'd like to share our company's experience with a local activist who tried to do just that. A young, determined individual who took a legitimate concern to a level that questioned the essential rightfulness of modern-day agriculture — while promoting himself and his cause. Fortunately, the target didn't stick.

My story starts with a secluded local lake about 1 mile from our nursery that began to develop algae problems around 5 years ago. As is human nature, rightful concern by lakeside residents was soon channeled into an exercise of finger pointing — with the dogged guidance of this neighboring activist. The nursery industry became the scapegoat for what environmental consultants and the Department of Environmental Protection would go on to characterize as a complex problem with a multitude of potential causes. In other cases throughout the state — where lakes were experiencing far worse conditions — such factors as: geese, drought, natural contaminants, and septic systems were cited in addition to agriculture as contributing sources. But not here, we were the sole culprits. The target was positioned squarely on the back of our nursery and a neighboring grower.

Seeing this evolve into the headlines of a major regional paper was not a pleasant turn of events. A prior call from the journalist gave me a few days advance notice. After providing my perspective, I hoped for a balanced story about the problem. Instead, there we were, along with our neighboring nursery, as the headline targets of blame. Fortunately, the article included an off-the-cuff quote from me that, in hindsight, probably served as well as anything I could have scripted. It walked a fine line between presumed innocence and a total denial of responsibility. Here is what I said, *"We don't think we're part of the problem, we recycle 95% of our irrigation runoff. But, as we've mentioned from Day One, we'd be glad to take a hard look at that. We think that what we've been doing over the years, as far as proactive management, is keeping us out of the equation of this particular problem."* The article went on to say that a call to the other nursery was not returned. As it turns out, the owners were away on vacation. Unfortunately though, it made it look as though they were hiding from the issue.

And then, the online postings started. Inflammatory and exaggerated comments began to characterize this as yet another environmental disaster with an agricultural cover up. Wisely or not, I felt compelled to respond. I posted my thoughts in defense of our neighbor and ourselves. Fortunately, others likewise tried to add reason to the discussion.

This ultimately grew into a face-saving effort, on the activist's part, to make his case to environmental groups, local government agencies, and the state Dept of Environmental Protection. Along the way, I tried to counter misstatements with a reasoned and factual rebuttal. Some of the main points I cited:

- Our ongoing openness with all concerned parties.
- The extent of our conservation efforts over the years.
- The fact that only a few acres of our production area drains in the direction of the lake, and that is only because of a network of government-sanctioned conservation diversions and waterways we installed soon after we purchased the property in 1988.
- Drainage from that area dissipates in our intervening 16 acres of woodlands — well before it reaches the lake nearly a mile away.
- The existence of a wide range of potential contributing sources besides agriculture.
- The fact that our nursery couldn't have been a triggering cause to a problem that started 5–6 years ago, since the production practices utilized in that portion of our nursery have been the same for the last 10 years.
- And, contrary to claims that lakeside septic systems had no role in the problem, I was able to provide a copy of a hypocritical letter our neighboring activist had written a few years prior to a farmer across the street. In that letter, he asked the farmer to relocate the house his daughter was building out of concern that the septic system might contaminate a lake nearly 1/2 mile away!

Shortly after making that point, and others, in a final letter to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, I received a letter of apology. While magnanimous on his part, it unfortunately did nothing to rectify the public wrong that was done with his prior rush to judgment. Nor did it give me any false sense of security that his zealous pursuit was finally finished.

Changing gears, what I would like to now focus on are the conservation measures in which our company invested during the years prior to this incident, along with those additional measures which we initiated coincidental to this event. It is proactive steps, such as these, that provided credibility to my arguments during our rebuttal. An approach you might want to consider for your own circumstances.

Our efforts started with our first recycling project in the early 1990s. A retention basin was installed at the low point where most of the drainage from our nursery flows. In addition to capturing irrigation runoff, this basin serves as the main source of irrigation water for our nursery. This system was expanded in 2002. More recently, we have added two new basins adjacent to the original one. When completed, these will add an additional 3.3 million gal of storage capacity.

Around the same time as this latest expansion, we started work on yet another water retention project. This fourth basin allows us to capture runoff from an area on the other side of our property where we plan to extend production. Topography prevents this section from gravity-flowing into our primary recycling system. But, with the help of an automated pumping system, retained water can now be pumped back over the hill to be recycled.

In addition to capturing the water from future production in this area, this latest basin has now allowed us to capture the small percentage of irrigation runoff that previously drained into our woodlands — via the conservation diversions mentioned earlier. With an upcoming final project, we will be able to capture a remaining fraction of irrigation runoff. This will allow us to go from a current recycling rate of over 99% to essentially a 100% capture rate. Our ability to retain

storm water runoff will also be increased significantly. All of which should remove ourselves from any consideration whatsoever as a potential contributing factor to circumstances at the nearby lake.

In addition to our water recycling efforts, we have long utilized a range of other conservation measures that help support our claim of being a responsible steward of the lands under our ownership. Our work with drip irrigation, erosion control, topsoil preservation, materials recycling, and energy conservation help us make the case that our actions indeed demonstrate our intent.

In total, these measures have cost us a lot of money. But these are costs that each of us pays, one way or the other — either proactively before the accusations, or reactively afterwards.

The choice between those alternative approaches is certainly everyone's to make. On our end, we prefer the peace of mind, and credible defense, that proactive planning provides.