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SPECS/FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

Smart Irrigation

McDonald's franchisee cuts expenses with automated water-management system

By Marianne Wilson

Most landscapes are overwatered, and retail facilities are no exception. But water conservation is becoming a hot-button issue as building owners and facility managers push efforts to reduce operating expenses and help the environment. A high-tech, in-ground water-management system has enabled McDonald's in Simi Valley, Calif., to do both by eliminating overwatering. The system also has resulted in an added benefit: enhanced curb appeal.

The restaurant, operated by McDonald's franchisee Wayne Herbert, is using the WeatherTRAK smart irrigation-control system, from HydroPoint Data Systems, Petaluma, Calif. The system automatically controls irrigation on a day-to-day basis, delivering the precise amount of water needed, based on individual-site needs, and daily local weather conditions (it draws on information delivered wirelessly from some 17,000 weather stations). The irrigation is automatically adjusted in accordance with the changing weather.

To determine the site needs, landscape-specific components such as plant, soil, slope and sprinkler type are pre-programmed into the smart-controller system, which then determines an optimal irrigation equation. The system can be monitored from a central location on a Web browser, and adjustments made if needed. Also, it can alert owners and facility managers as to problems, such as a cracked irrigation pipe.

High water bills: Prior to installing WeatherTRAK, McDonald's water bill was \$3,544 (for two months). Water usage for the same was 545,075 gallons. Beyond high water costs, overwatering was causing other problems, including cracking concrete, unsightly puddles and sidewalk stains that



marred the appearance of the property. Also, hardscapes slick from chronic overwatering had led to potential slip-fall liabilities.

On the advice of McDonald's owner/operator Deborah Vass, who uses WeatherTRAK at her Moorpark, Calif.,

Outdoor Overwatering

The widespread practice of overwatering landscapes has sky-high costs for businesses, starting with high water bills (and higher rates). Businesses also spend millions of dollars annually repairing property damage caused by chronic overwatering and the resulting runoff. The California Insurance Association reported nearly \$500 million in insurance claims due to water damages in 2005, and blamed outdoor water use in 75% of instances.

Overwatered landscapes also pose a risk to environmental health. Water runoff from overwatered landscapes is the culprit behind non-point source water pollution. Pollutants running off overwatered landscapes include nitrates, phosphates, pesticides, herbicides and bacteria.

store, Herbert brought in WeatherTRAK to review his property. He subsequently gave the green light to the WeatherTRAK solution, which can be used with existing in-ground irrigation equipment. The payback was quick in coming.

After one billing cycle, the restaurant's water usage declined dramatically, to 305,543 gallons from the previous 545,075 gallons. McDonald's water bill dropped to \$2,153 from the previous \$3,544, for a savings of \$1,391 (all figures are for two months).

Beyond reducing water costs, the smart-control irrigation system has resulted in a more attractive landscape, one that is drier and safer for customers. Also, the chance of property and environmental damage due to runoff (overwatered landscapes are a primary culprit) have been virtually eliminated.

As to the system cost, Herbert's upfront investment was \$1,701. (WeatherTRAK also charges a monthly service fee, ranging from \$4 a month for base systems to \$225 annually for Internet-enabled systems). Based on the savings, the payback was 73 days. The projected five-year savings is \$41,700.

"Over the years, I've had the chance to make many investments that promised outstanding savings," Herbert said. "WeatherTrak not only delivered what was pitched, but much more. I've reduced my water bill by 40%."

Herbert also is pleased with the environmental benefits. It's estimated that the restaurant will save 1.4 million gallons of water annually.

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