

Nanaimo venue a hit for WCTA



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THEâ€Western Canada Turfgrass Association's new executive director is ecstatic about the outcome of his first solo venture into staging the association's annual conference and show.

Jerry Rousseau, who succeeded Bob Wick in early 2009, had joined forces with his predecessor last year in putting on the WCTA's conference in Victoria, B.C., yet was solely responsible for organizing the 2010 edition.

"It was an incredible experience," said Rousseau, who had been superintendent at Kokanee Springs Golf Resort prior to joining the WCTA full time as its executive director.

He admitted there were some anxious moments in the months and weeks leading up to the February conference, mainly due to it being held at an untried venue, but the event proved to be well received by association members in spite of attendance tumbling slightly from the previous year.

Held at the new Vancouver Island Conference Centre in Nanaimo, the event attracted about 670 people. In addition to an economy which hasn't yet fully recovered, the impact of the Vancouver Olympic Games took its toll on attendance figures. Rousseau said several association members work in the Vancouver area, and were unable to leave their posts because of the demands placed upon them as facility managers in the couple of short weeks leading up to the games.

"Overall, though, we're pleased and impressed with that number."

The WCTA conference has been the largest event to date to be held inside the new Nanaimo facility. It also marked the first time the conference has ever been held in the city. Rousseau said the strong show of support is likely to lead toward Nanaimo being included in the association's rotating circle of host cities.

One of the conference's traditional attractions is its Sunday night president's reception, but Rousseau said attendees have typically left early even though it is normally well attended. Such wasn't the case this year.

"I was getting nervous about how I was going to get everybody out of there. It was just a buzz of activity and excitement. That really kicked things off."

A strong speaker program was offered to those in attendance. With British Columbia in the midst of determining whether or not to ban chemical pesticide products for use by turfgrass management professionals, Rousseau thought it would prove educational to bring in speakers who could present both sides of the argument.

"The speaker lineup was certainly a different kind of outlook. But it was fantastic."

Speaking in defence of pesticide product use was Jeffrey Lowes, director of government and industrial relations for MREP Communications in Kingston, Ont. He has accused the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) of faking medical reports to put a negative spin on pesticides.

Speaking in Nanaimo on the opposite side of the debate was Lisa Gue, a health and environmental policy analyst for the David Suzuki Foundation. Her address was particularly well attended, Rousseau said, admitting it was risky to bring her in. Other activists groups were invited to send a speaker to address the anti-pesticide argument, but Gue responded first and was granted a spot in the lineup.

“It could have got out of hand, but it didn’t,” Rousseau said. “Everyone was very cordial and professional. Iâ€™ commend Lisa for coming in to what could have been perceived as a hostile environment. There were no fireworks.”

Rousseau said he believes Gue’s involvement at the conference has opened the door to further communication between the opposing sides.

The British Columbia government had been soliciting submissions on the subject of cosmetic pesticide use in order to render sound legislation on the issue. The WCTA submitted a statement in time for the province’s Feb. 15 deadline and had encouraged its members to present their own personal thoughts.

During his days as a superintendent, Rousseau said he had wondered what the WCTA was doing in terms of making an official stand on pesticide use as well as protecting its use.

“We really didn’t have anything to guide me in my job as far as representing the members. I can’t start making statements that weren’t supported or haven’t been ratified. I kept pressing our board for that, and then we created this philosophy statement and brought it to the members at our annual general meeting. With that being ratified, I could finally make some interpretation and proceed with this submission.”

A mandate had been created in 1973 which was about research, education, discussion and creating benevolence for WCTA members.

“It didn’t really have the horsepower to deal with this current pesticide issue.”

Ratified at the WCTA’s annual general meeting in early February was the following statement:

“The purpose of the Society is to promote research and the interchange of scientific and practical knowledge relating to the care and management of turfgrass, thus bringing about more efficient and economical operation; to increase prestige for this Association and the promotion of the professional status of the individual members, as well as the occupation of turf supervision, including the production, maintenance and improvement of turfgrasses; to encourage cooperation with other associations and organizations whose interests parallel or complement those of the Association; to promote justice, benevolence and education to and for its members.

“The WCTA, in its efforts to represent all of its members and to promote the highest level of Integrated Pest Management and environmentally sustainable practices, is open to all points of view that support peer-reviewed, factual scientific research in support of education, innovations and practical knowledge related to the care and management of turfgrass.”

Although the association encouraged its members to submit their own thoughts about the future of pesticide use, it was careful not to sway them in any particular direction. In the meantime, the association tried to provide as much information as possible to its members on the subject, including the provision of a link to the Integrated Environmental Plant Management Association (IEPMA) of Western Canada’s website where an online petition calling for the proper use of pesticides could be signed.

“We were providing as much information as we could on the issue in its entirety and say, ‘You guys decide what to do or think about what we’re going to do and then proceed from there.’” Rousseau said.

Next year’s WCTA conference and show will be a joint effort with the Canadian Golf Superintendents Association and will be held in Vancouver.





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