NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LANDSCAPE PROFESSIONALS

POSITION STATEMENT

Leaf Blowers

The National Association of Landscape Professionals acknowledges and understands that public opposition to the use of gasoline-powered leaf blowers is based upon concerns about noise, dust, and air emissions. However, an outright ban on this equipment would be the severest of all possible remedies and one that would eliminate its many benefits. A ban should be a last resort and enacted only after exhausting all other alternatives.

It is NALP's position that many other alternatives currently exist that would alleviate the public's concern about gasoline-powered leaf blowers without depriving landscape industry contractors of this extremely efficient, safe tool. We wish to help find a solution to this issue that is fair and equitable to both the public and contractors who use leaf blowers. Therefore, we respectfully offer the following information for consideration.

- NALP opposes across-the-board bans on gasoline-powered leaf blowers. NALP believes these bans are unnecessary, bad public policy, and extremely harmful to the landscape industry.

- Leaf blowers are essential for landscape industry professionals. This is because these machines are efficient tools for cleaning up leaves, grass, fertilizer granules, and other small debris from lawn and landscape sites. Since their development in the 1970s, to a large extent, leaf blowers have supplanted brooms, hoses, and rakes. Leaf blowers even perform functions that no other tool can handle effectively, such as cleaning areas covered by rock, gravel, bark, or mulch.

- Leaf blowers save enormous amounts of time. Most estimates suggest that it takes at least five times as long to clean a typical landscape site with a broom and rake than it does with a power leaf blower. Similarly, a city's maintenance supervisors estimated that for its parks and public buildings, its crews would take 50 hours to do work that took 10 hours with leaf blowers. Much of that work would require the use of water. Additionally, a 1992 labor efficiency comparison report of another city concluded that a job that took 2.25 labor hours with a backpack leaf blower compared to 76 labor hours when the work was done with a hose and 282 with a broom. The bottom line is that without leaf blowers, public agencies and private owners would have to spend more time on outdoor work or accept a lower level of upkeep.
- Time is money. It is estimated that landscape costs (and therefore charges) would increase from 20 to 40 percent if operators must perform the same functions without a leaf blower.

- NALP believes many clients can't afford or are not willing to pay for the additional costs of performing lawn and landscape maintenance without leaf blowers. They would either allow their landscapes to deteriorate, do the work themselves, or find companies willing to violate the law. The last option is a possibility because to date, bans on leaf blowers have been difficult to enforce in municipalities that have passed an ordinance. Additionally, this option would adversely affect our members because we play by the rules by the very nature of the way our businesses are organized. NALP members are all state-licensed, if required. They pay workers' compensation as well as liability insurance. They deduct federal and state income taxes from payrolls. Many of our members offer health insurance for employees and their families. Unfortunately, they compete against a vast underground economy of unlicensed people and companies that do not play by the rules. We believe these unlicensed operators would flaunt a ban on leaf blowers if given the chance, and consequently, they would be able to underbid our members for contracts for lawn and landscape maintenance. Legitimate lawn and landscape contractors could go out of business and their employees would loose jobs that pay well.
- The leaf blower is an alternative to hosing down walks and driveways with water. Using water in this manner is an unreasonable waste of a precious natural resource. The reality is that people always will take the next easiest course of action when one course of action is closed to them. Hosing down walkways and driveways is much easier, quicker, and more efficient than broom-cleaning those surfaces.

- Leaf blowers make no more noise than many other types of power equipment.

- Exposure to high decibels of noise can damage hearing. However, to provide some perspective on the issue of noise from leaf blowers and hearing loss, it should be pointed out that the U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) does not require a hearing-protection program for employees unless noise exposures equal or exceed an eight-hour, time-weighted average sound level of 85 decibels. Although this regulation should not be taken to imply that lower decibels are always safe, compare it with the noise from the more advanced leaf blowers. Some of the newer machines are rated at, or less than, 70 decibels at 50 feet at full throttle. And, unlike lawn and landscape maintenance personnel, who need hearing protection because of their long hours of exposure to noise coming from a machine a few feet away from their ears, residents and homemakers are exposed to noise from leaf blowers for only a few minutes a week at much greater distances.
- NALP acknowledges that leaf blowers can be a nuisance. However, we believe the culprits are old technology and improper use. Both problems can be remedied by means other than indiscriminate bans.

- NALP strongly encourages manufacturers of leaf blowers to place a high priority on noise-reduction improvements. However, credit should go where credit is due. Today's leaf blowers are significantly more quiet than their predecessors of 10 years ago. Manufacturers have steadily reduced noise levels, and in recent years, one manufacturer has voluntarily adhered to a maximum of 70 decibels (dBa) at full-throttle at 50 feet from

the source. In 1996, this manufacturer introduced a revolutionary leaf blower that generated a mere 65 dBa at full throttle at 50 feet from the source — without sacrificing performance. Manufacturers can be expected to make future noise-reduction improvements, if given the chance.

- NALP believes that landscape industry professionals and homeowners should be informed about the noise levels of leaf-blower equipment before purchasing blowers. We believe that most buyers, if properly informed, would opt for the most quiet equipment, all other factors being equal. Unfortunately, some manufacturers do not disclose this information. NALP therefore calls upon all manufacturers to comply with the provisions of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) B 175.2 Standard for Hand-Held and Backpack Gasoline-Engine-Powered Blowers. In particular, we urge all manufacturers to do the following:
    1. adhere to the ANSI 175.2 sound-level test procedure

    2. ensure that all equipment and packaging are clearly and durably marked with the decibel rating

    3. establish a certification program to identify products that comply with the ANSI 175.2 standard. Furthermore, we encourage manufacturers to amend the standard to establish maximum sound levels.

- Although NALP prefers other methods of dealing with noise from leaf blowers it does not oppose efforts to prohibit outmoded equipment — as long as the standards are not unreasonable in light of the existing technology on the market. We suggest that efforts to prohibit outmoded equipment be accompanied by buy-back programs. At a minimum, bans on outmoded equipment should go into effect at least one year after a decision is made. This would give users crucial lead time to phase-out their equipment.
- NALP believes the vast majority of commercial operators use their leaf blowers responsibly. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that improper use is a problem. It is caused chiefly by lack of knowledge, but, regrettably, it is sometimes a result of lack of courtesy for others.

- Cities, municipalities, and NALP should partner together to educate the public as well as the landscape industry about proper use of leaf blower equipment. Educational programs should include the following information:

    1. Generally speaking, leaf blowers should be run at half throttle most of the time. Low throttle speeds not only significantly reduce noise, but they also provide the operator with maximum control. Full throttle is seldom necessary.
    2. Leaf blowers should not be used in residential areas at unreasonable hours —early in the morning or late at night when people are likely to be disturbed.

3. Debris should never be blown onto adjacent property, the street, vehicles, people, or pets.

4. Leaf blowers should not be used within 10 feet of doors or windows.

5. Crews should operate only one leaf blower at a time on small residential sites.

6. Rakes or brooms should be used to loosen heavier debris.

7. The full nozzle extension should be used so the air stream can work close to the ground.

8. The muffler, air intakes, and air filers should be checked routinely to make sure they are working properly.

9. Leaf blowers should not be used to move large debris piles from one spot to another.

- NALP believes that informed citizens and landscape industry workers are likely to be more considerate. For the few who may lack common courtesy even after increased knowledge, city ordinances mandating proper use under penalty of a steep fine may be necessary. NALP does not oppose ordinances that mandate common sense rules of courtesy for using leaf blowers.

- Nor would NALP oppose an ordinance requiring a governor attachment to leaf blowers that limited their throttle speed in order to meet local dBa requirements. Such an ordinance would address the noise problem from outmoded equipment without going so far as to remove that equipment from the market. On the negative side, however, this solution would prevent users from switching to a higher throttle speed on the few occasions when it may be appropriate to do so, such as when they are doing their work at a substantial distance away from other people.
- Electric-powered leaf blowers are not an acceptable substitute for gas-powered machines. Most landscape industry professionals estimate that electric leaf blowers reduce efficiency by 50 percent. They tend to be less powerful than gas leaf blowers, and they are limited by the need for an extension cord that must be continually plugged in and unplugged. Electric leaf blowers also can be hazardous to operators. Swimming pools, spas, garden ponds, and moisture from lawn and landscape irrigation make for a potential electric shock problem. Additionally, the heavier duty electric leaf blowers, which are comparable in power to gas leaf blowers, do not reduce noise significantly. Finally, noise from electric leaf blowers is compounded by the noise produced by a generator if electrical outlets aren't available.

- The air emission issue is a spurious issue when applied to local regulations for leaf blowers. For example, standards that were put in place by the California Air Resources Board (CARB) for 1995 have been met, and in most cases, exceeded by all leaf blowers sold in that state today. Air pollution issues are being addressed by CARB, the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the regional air quality districts — not cities and counties. Moreover, the frequently used criticism that leaf blowers produce emissions greater than cars should be placed in proper perspective. Actual emissions from leaf blowers are few because of the equipment's intermittent use. For example, one year of volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions from cars compares to 21 years of emissions from portable lawn and garden products. Portable lawn and garden equipment contributes only 0.8 percent of all U.S. VOC emissions, 0.6 percent of carbon monoxide emissions, and no nitrogen oxide emissions. (This comparison comes from an analysis of EPA emissions inventory data prepared for the Portable Power Equipment Manufacturers Association by Heiden & Associates of Washington, D.C.)
- NALP members are always willing to work constructively with city and county public officials to develop win-win solutions to this increasingly prominent issue.