



ASHRAE 189.1 — Be Prepared to Object and Take Action

■ BY PAUL MENDELSON

Members of the landscape industry are faced with a new threat from an unexpected direction in the form of a model standard for the sustainable construction of commercial buildings developed by the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration, and Air Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE).

Because of a deal between the International Code Council and ASHRAE, the ASHRAE 189.1 standard will also become the technical requirements of the next edition of the International Green Construction Code (IgCC).

ASHRAE 189.1 Standard for the Design of High-Performance Green Buildings regulates most of the things you would expect from a building code: energy efficiency, materials, indoor environment, water usage, etc.

But ASHRAE 189.1 also has a chapter dedicated to sustainable site development, and this is where landscape professionals are significantly impacted. Unfortunately, the landscape design provisions are virtually nonexistent except to limit the allowable area of turfgrass to no more than 40 percent of the vegetated area, with an exception for golf and athletic fields. No other use of turfgrass is exempt from the limitation. The limitation applies regardless of irrigation needs, climate, topography, or functional requirements of the site. Regrettably, it is intended to be adopted and used for regulation by state and local governments.

The provisions of ASHRAE 189.1 are developed and maintained by a large committee comprised of engineers, energy-efficiency advocates, construction material interests, utility representatives, and federal agency representatives. Unfortunately, none of the committee members have any expertise in landscape design, or understand the versatility, resilience, and sustainability of natural turfgrass. For several years, the National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP), working with industry partners through the Greenscapes Alliance, has attempted to educate the ASHRAE 189.1 committee on the benefits of turfgrass and has argued against the current prescriptive, one-size-fits-all turfgrass limitation.

The committee has been informed that both the EPA's WaterSense Specification and the IgCC eliminated their respective turfgrass limits because of a lack of technical justification, and that neither the Sustainable Sites Initiative's SITES rating system nor the US Green Building Council's LEED rating system has a turfgrass limit.

NALP, Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), and other members of the Greenscapes Alliance testified to the inconsistency of the ASHRAE 189.1 requirements from other accepted landscape design criteria and related technical facts in a hearing before an ASHRAE appeals panel in November 2014.

That panel found no technical justification for the turfgrass limits in ASHRAE 189.1 and returned the results of the appeal to the ASHRAE 189.1 committee for further consideration.

Equipped with the decision of the appeals panel, a proposal was made by OPEI's representative to the ASHRAE 189.1 committee to replace the prescriptive turfgrass limitation with a requirement for qualified landscape design using a registered or licensed landscape design professional.

The ASHRAE 189.1 committee considered our request to solicit public comments on the proposed elimination of turfgrass limits and the requirement for qualified design, but failed to pass the motion for an advisory public review. This failure to act reflects a general disdain and misunderstanding by the majority of the committee members for the knowledge and expertise of the professional landscape industry.

Not one of the 38 voting members of the committee is affiliated in any capacity with the professional landscape industry in design, installation or maintenance. Unfortunately, the committee voted that it was unnecessary to seek public comment on landscape design.

It would appear that this committee does not care about the professional landscape industry, and is comfortable in passing judgment on technical and policy issues despite the fact that it has no technical expertise on the matter. The ASHRAE 189.1 committee is frequently assured that it can do as it will with the content of the standard, and it exercises that authority freely.

This circumstance leaves the professional landscape industry in the position of having to resist the adoption and use of ASHRAE 189.1 (and, beginning in 2018, the IgCC) by state and local governments. The NALP, its members, and its allies in the professional landscape industry must be vigilant on this issue. We all must work together and closely monitor state and local government processes for any proposals to apply ASHRAE 189.1, and be prepared to object and take action. NALP is ready and able to provide talking points and arguments to help you successfully deter this threat to your livelihood.

To be fair, our goal need only be to block the use of the landscape design provisions of the standard, without defeating the entire measure. Of course, it also would have been appropriate for ASHRAE to recognize the expertise of the professional landscape industry, and allow comments on the landscape design requirements of the standard — thus ensuring better protection of our environment and our communities and recognizing the many contributions that landscape professionals make in creating a more sustainable outdoor environment. ■

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