

North County Business

# Landscape manager is putting the squeeze on water

By Wendy Vurik

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John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune

A Bemus Landscaping worker checked on vegetation in San Elijo Hills, where Bemus manages the Village Square property.



Photos by John Gastaldo

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The Orange County-based service's directors are Colin Bemus (left) and Joe Montross.

From an office in San Marcos, Bemus Landscape Inc. is working with San Diego County homeowners associations and commercial clients to create landscape solutions in a water-challenged region.

The company manages some 30 to 40 local commercial properties and homeowners associations, including Sunroad Centrum, Village Square in San Elijo Hills and The Farms in Rancho Santa Fe.

“When we start a new project, we do a very intense survey on the irrigation systems,” said Jon Piggins, a business development manager based in San Diego. “We want our clients to be aware of what they can do to be saving water.”

Bemus Landscape has its corporate headquarters in Orange County, and offices in San Diego and the Inland Empire. It employs about 200 people.

What started in 1973 as a company focused on maintenance came to also include construction projects. About eight years ago, Bemus Landscape returned to its roots as a management company, said Colin Bemus, president of landscape management.

“Our focus is to help our clients transform their property into sustainable landscapes,” said Colin Bemus, president of landscape management.

Bemus is the son of company founder Bill Bemus, who started the business with “a pickup truck and a lawn mower,” Colin Bemus said.

They highly recommend the installation of weather-based water controllers, which can be adjusted according to the season, Piggins said.

The controllers can keep track of things such as solar radiation, wind, temperature and humidity. “The technology has caught up with the demand,” said Joseph Montross, vice president of business development.

It can be expensive.

“It can be as little as \$500 to install one of these controllers using a rebate and on the expensive end up to \$10,000,” Piggins said.

The expense depends on the size of the controller, flow sensors, master valves or rewiring that may have to be done.

For the 10 acres of The Farms in Rancho Santa Fe, Bemus Landscape is in the process of installing the weather controllers. They have managed the property for last three years.

“Our water bill is expensive. It’s a big expense in an association,” said Nancy Bell, president of the homeowners association at The Farms.

“We want to have plant materials that look good and we want to be careful with money. We want to be very smart about fire, too,” she said.

“People’s budgets are a lot tighter these days,” Piggins said. “We come up with creative ways to still make their landscapes look beautiful and keep costs down.”

The installation of drought tolerant plantings is one way they achieve this aim. Common plantings they use include deer and fountain grass, ground cover like Acacia Desert Carpet and trees like the Coast Live Oak and the California Sycamore.

The use of mulch is also a cost-cutting technique Bemus uses. The company hauls all of its green waste to a mulch-recycler in Chino.

“One of the benefits to the environment is that we don’t put our green waste into landfills,” Montross said. “We are taking it back to the property — conserving water and eliminating water and runoff streams.”

Bemus Landscape recently was recognized for its landscape projects. The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) awarded Bemus a national Merit Award for Talega, a residential community of 4,000 homes on more than 3,000 acres in San Clemente. Bemus also received a Judges Beautification Award from the California Landscape Contractors Association for work at One Ford Road, a homeowners association in Newport Beach.

With this recognition, the company is looking to expand its operations in the San Diego area.

“San Diego is going to be a great area of focus for water management and sustainable landscapes,” Montross said. “San Diego is the farthest down the pipeline from the water source.

“This is a great place for our business to be.”

*Wendy Vurik is a freelance writer in Oceanside.*