

Hitting the Road

The logo for Turf, featuring the word "Turf" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A green grass blade graphic is integrated into the letter 'T'. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the right of the word.The logo for Tree Services, featuring the words "Tree Services" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small green leaf graphic is positioned above the letter 'e' in "Services". Below the main text is the tagline "Taking Tree Care to New Heights" in a smaller, italicized font. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the right of the word "Services".The logo for DesignBuild, featuring the word "Design" in a black, sans-serif font and the word "Build" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. A small orange square graphic is positioned above the letter 'i' in "Design". A registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the right of the word "Build".The logo for PLOW, featuring the word "PLOW" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the right of the word.

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Commercial highway work keeps this seed company in business



Hydroseeding on Avenue D in Gering, Neb.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF GROSS SEED COMPANY.

John Gross is a seeding contractor who knows the road to staying in business these days is just that: the road. His company, the Gross Seed Company in Johnstown, Neb., has carved a niche for itself in commercial highway work throughout two-thirds of the state of Nebraska. It's no secret that there isn't much in the way of new construction in the U.S., but there is a lot of rehabilitation work, some of it funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

Gross says his company's success is rooted in its versatility. "We are the estimator, the supervisor and the foreman," he says. "We do a lot of different things, but we also are not top-heavy with management. One secretary and I run the office, and in the field, cell phones and laptops help the employees be able to keep in touch with the office."

Gross says the company does primarily low-bid work with some routine customers, such as airports, that will require occasional, ongoing maintenance. While most of the work the company does is road rehabilitation projects, new types of work have emerged, such as for wind farms, ethanol plants and wetlands. "Due to distance and mobilization, we do everything from seeding with straw mulches and then the more expensive blankets. Recently, we bought a Finn HydroSeeder because that's more economical than the blankets in a lot of places. The demand has been that you may be able to do a lot of things rather than specializing," says Gross.

"There's not enough population, not enough work in western Nebraska to pick up one segment of this industry," Gross adds. "When you come into a job, you've got to be able to put the silt fence in, do the erosion control and

possibly some clean out as the job progresses.”

To address fluctuating fuel costs as they affect his cost of doing business, Gross’ company buys fuel cards. “We’re able to purchase 75 percent of our fuel in advance,” says Gross. “We buy it in January when gas is cheaper.”



Blown hay-straw on Buffalo Bill Avenue.

As for other transportation-related costs, such as tires, they have to be integrated into the bid, Gross says. “You either add it onto the price of the erosion control blanket or the acre price,” he says.

When it comes to seeding road projects, most of the time the seed mixture is determined by the state’s highway agency or other landowner, Gross notes. As for the rest of the choices, Gross relies on the knowledge he garnered from growing up in the business, as well as input from seed companies and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

In addition to keeping his staff small, each of Gross’ employees is trained to do any task that is needed to complete a job. The company has three to five employees and will boost it to 20, as needed, with temporary help. “If you’ve got three guys who are versatile and you hit a larger job, you pick up local help through employment agencies and give each one of them two or three people to help them do one segment of the job, and then once we’re done, we go back down to our three,” he says. Gross screens temporary employees through E-Verify, an Internet site offered through the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. He’ll also hire high school students. Working through agencies raises his overhead, but helps him screen out temporary workers who would not, for a number of reasons, be a good fit.

Gross notes that while there has been an increase in work, there’s been a decrease in price. “I think there’s a serious problem of people getting into the business who don’t understand overhead,” says Gross. “It’s easy to get into, and it takes them three to five years to get broke or sell out, and meanwhile they have ruined the market.” However, Gross says most of his competitors are “friendly” competitors. “We’ve been short on work and pick up extra jobs that somebody else can’t get to only if and when it’s profitable,” Gross says. “Over the years, we’ve gotten quite a lot of work because somebody else was overbooked, but you can’t always do it at their price.”

Gross Seed Company does a great deal of environmental work and addresses several challenges, such as dealing with the removal of the Western red cedar. “The Western red cedar they planted in the plains of Nebraska for wind protection around the homes and protecting cattle have become an invasive species,” says Gross. “So, you have trees out in the middle of your pasture in a fragile ecosystem. The cows get to compacting around that tree, knock out that grass and the wind will blow the soil. There’s a big push to keep the trees in the canyons, and we don’t even want them there. It’s a matter of a good thing that 30 years later has gone a little bad.”



Erosion control on Buffalo Bill Avenue in North Platte, Neb.

One of the challenges in working on environmental issues is balancing it out with economics, Gross says. "Regulations change so fast, and the industry is trying to respond to unknown and changing regulations that I'm not sure are based in sound science or coming forward in a sound way," says Gross. "Somebody decides this with no thought to the economy, and the Nebraska Department of Roads has to figure out how to make it work. Then, when you come back with field observations, the regulatory agency's unwilling to bend or be innovative in new ideas, so it's a phenomenal cost." Adding to that cost pressure against the backdrop of increasing environmental concerns is a lack of funds available to the state's road department, Gross notes. "We have state employees who have gone to a one-day class who will argue with you over the cost of doing an item that they have to pay for because they're watching their budgets so tight, and yet they are telling me I'm a co-permittee and liable for that fine. They won't pay for the devices that we need." An example is temporary measures such as silt fence, says Gross. "There are devices that will help protect a job site, and yet the cost of my work is exceeded by the potential fines from the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other environmental agencies," he says.



Drilled and seeded on the left side of B Street in Scottsbluff, Neb.

Years ago, Gross never thought his job would encompass protecting endangered species, but it has. He believes extraordinary measures taken to protect endangered species can be costly. One such endangered species in Nebraska is the American burying beetle. "We are gearing multimillion-dollar asphalt plants around the American burying beetle. The beetle might be worth saving, and it's definitely worth being concerned about, but when economics meets the environment, it needs to meet in a realistic way. They're making us do things, but they can't prove that it works. The reason it's an endangered species is that their environment was destroyed in Ohio and Iowa and places back east, and we haven't destroyed their environment here, yet we have to spend a phenomenal amount of money to save the beetle. Economics needs to meet the environment at some point." Gross would like to see "sound science" dictate how to handle such matters. "The American burying beetle lives off of dead critters. Why can't we bait it away?" says Gross. "They make us trap it and move it; to me, the human enactment with that bug seems to be a higher risk than just baiting and throwing extra food out there to get it to go someplace else to nest."

Having been in the business throughout his life, Gross concedes there will always be a challenge to address. Going forward, he says his company will be looking at expanding its market segments into more private sector work to leverage its versatility. It's that versatility that has kept his company on the road and in the field.

Gross Seed Company

Location: Johnstown, Neb.

Clientele: Residential and commercial

Services: Seeding, hydroseeding, erosion control

Carol Brzozowski is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has written extensively about environmental issues for numerous trade journals for more than a decade. She resides in Coral Springs, Fla.