



horticultural
services

by *sodexo**

Grass seed technology reduces bird strikes

Sodexo renovates one of the largest
airfields in the country and improves pilot
safety thanks to horticultural expertise

Grass seed technology reduces bird strikes

The challenge

RAF Marham is one of the largest airfields in the country. However, it was quickly becoming one of the more dangerous too, with bird strikes reaching an all-time high. Sodexo designed a solution that not only made life a lot safer for pilots, but also helped the client reduce the site's impact on the environment.

The solution

Sodexo took on the contract to provide horticultural services at the RAF's six main operating bases for strike command in 2009. One of these bases was the airfield in RAF Marham which was in need of some serious attention.

Some 50 per cent of the 315 hectares was dead grass, which meant debris was in danger of blowing about causing a potential safety hazard. On further investigation, Sodexo found that the cause was actually an infestation of chafer grubs.

Chafer grubs had eaten the grass roots. Furthermore, the infestation attracted more birds to the airfield, which proved to be hugely dangerous for pilots. There were some 30,000

bird visits recorded each month – and one serious bird strike can cause a fatality.

Sodexo put in a proposal to renovate the airfield. The scale of the renovation and the speed with which Sodexo proposed to do it had never been achieved before.

Sodexo soon set about removing the grass sward that was currently on the site and controlling the re-growth. They then direct drilled grass seed across the airfield and applied fertiliser to tackle the problem as soon as possible.

The benefits

Sodexo completed the renovation in just six weeks and did so with no downtime for the RAF. In fact, it was such a success that the client has since asked Sodexo to do the same at its Coningsby airfield.

The impact on pilots' wellbeing and quality of life has been immense. In a matter of weeks the number of bird visits has declined from 30,000 to just 2,000 – a huge reduction, which ultimately makes for a far safer operation.

Sodexo's innovative thinking meant that its solution to the RAF's challenge even tackled green issues. The new grass seed locks in an impressive 13.5 tonnes of carbon per hectare. Previously, the grass produced 3.5 tonnes through composting, so now allowing RAF Marham to carbon offset a further 10 tonnes per hectare. So as well making the skies safer, Sodexo has also improved RAF Marham's green credentials!

As well as renovating the area, Sodexo was keen to ensure bird visits continued to remain low. The team achieved this in two ways.

The new grass grown at the site has an upright habit, which makes it very difficult for birds to land. Additionally, Sodexo has introduced a new cutting regime, which means grass is now cut to 200mm rather than 150mm as it was previously. As well as reducing the amount of carbon released into the environment, the new cutting regime makes for a spikier grass, which again acts as a deterrent for birds landing at RAF Marham.



Cover photo: Shows the airfield at RAF Marham six weeks after reseeded prior to the first cut.