A Warm Spring is Good for Golf, But . . .

Warm early spring conditions have been great for golf, but it is important to remember many courses are not yet fully staffed and pest management programs may require adjustments.

BY THE USGA GREEN SECTION

Tee it up! Golf activity always parallels the weather. A mild winter and warm early spring conditions have been welcomed by golfers across the country. Golfers are not the only ones loving the weather, however, as golf facilities are seeing boosts in early season revenues. Obviously, the unanticipated financial gains are important to all golf facilities but especially helpful to courses that suffered abysmal margins last year due to extreme weather conditions, most notably the severe drought in the southern U.S. and excessive rain and heat in many Midwestern and northern states.

As golfers gain an early start honing their game in 2012, golf course superintendents are busy with course preparations roughly a month or more ahead of schedule. Staffing is limited at this time and the labor hours available are typically reserved for completing off-season projects, such as drainage installation, tree maintenance, bunker renovations, etc. With full staff levels still several weeks away, turf managers are scrambling to condition golf courses to meet expectations while still trying to complete scheduled off-season projects.

Labor is the largest line item in a golf course maintenance budget, so the obvious concern in bringing seasonal employees back early is an effect on the bottom line. An early start to the golf season equates to an extended golf season, and this requires more labor and resources for course conditioning and setup. Operating budgets are determined well in advance and on the assumption of a golf season more typical in length. Unless serious adjustments are made to the "to do" list, it is unlikely that turf managers can operate within the approved operating budgets created months in advance. Keep these early-season expenses in mind as the season progresses.

Forsythia bloom, a common plant indicator for turf managers to apply pre-emergent herbicides for crabgrass prevention, is three to four weeks ahead of schedule in many parts of the U.S.

In addition to labor concerns, a few other factors need to be considered as they relate to the early spring.

- A significant amount of winter and/or early spring play on putting greens that are not actively growing could lead to turf thinning and bumpy surfaces. Turf may be green but not actively growing and therefore unable to recover from wear injury. Or, if it is growing, is it growing fast enough to stay ahead of wear? Additional nitrogen inputs and light topdressing may be necessary to promote active growth for recovery from traffic stress. Additional aeration and rolling may also be necessary to smooth the surfaces from winter play. To further complicate early season turf recovery efforts from increased winter play, sometimes regional challenges exist, with one such example being a state regulation in New York that does not allow golf courses to apply nitrogen until April 1.
- For cool-season turfgrasses, spring is the time to produce a healthy and deep root system, which is an indicator of how well the turf is prepared for hot summer conditions. An earlier spring could equate to a longer period in which to build a deep, healthy root system before summer. However, root production is directly related to mowing height,

(Left) To help identify leaf diseases, place a plug on a scanner. This image was scanned at 300 dpi. (Right) Increasing the scanner resolution to 1200 dpi will yield an extreme close-up of the leaves and provide insight into disease symptoms, fungicide coverage, and even the sharpness of the cutting units.

so potential gains in rooting could be thwarted by earlier than normal ultra-low mowing heights on putting greens.

- Warm-season grasses have greened up but have yet to begin the lateral growth necessary to recover from whatever damage was experienced last fall and through the winter. As a result, they are highly susceptible to additional injury from concentrated traffic. The key is to control traffic **before** damage occurs, not after it is obvious to everyone.
- Pre-emergence herbicides used to suppress summer annual grassy weeds (e.g. crabgrass and goosegrass) will need to be applied earlier than normal because soil temperatures warmed up so early. With the early application, some herbicides may not last the entire season, and this could lead to weed breakthrough later in the season. An additional pre-emergence application may be necessary for season-long control, or additional post-emergence control may be necessary.
- An early rise in air and soil temperatures brings with it earlier insect emergence and activity. Proper insecticide timing is crucial for control, and the early spring dictates that adjustments to planned control strategies will be necessary. Not only are insecticide applications needed earlier in the year for control, but the extended season may also require repeat applications. For the northeast U.S., the annual bluegrass weevil, a tiny, yet devastating turf insect, becomes active as spring weather warms. The insect has become active already in many areas weeks ahead of schedule, which will add to the challenge of preventing this pest from damaging golf course turf. For the southern parts of the country, nematode and mole cricket activity has demanded earlier control treatments that may have to be repeated as the season wears on.
- Disease prevention programs may require adjustments, especially for pathogen control that is implemented based on soil temperature (e.g., summer patch). Many courses will need to make initial applications earlier than normal and potentially require more total applications for the season. For instance, summer patch disease prevention in most situations requires control from mid May through August. That window may be extended by an extra month this year. On courses with bermudagrass greens, leaf spot (*Bipolaris* and *Drechslera*) has been much more active and is present earlier than usual. Other turf diseases may become active earlier as well, extending the need for fungicide applications, which will add significant costs. Remember, heavy traffic and slow turfgrass growth increase disease occurrence, reduce the effectiveness of control efforts, and exacerbate disease damage.
- Earlier than normal maintenance may also mean earlier than normal impacts on the budget. Regular mowing and other routine maintenance tasks cost money. Enjoy the additional early season revenue, but remember the potential impacts that this may have on your maintenance budget!

Golf courses are busy and that is a great thing! Just remember that with all the benefits of the early spring warm weather, there are season-long implications for the turf and operating budget. Some golf course maintenance practices may need to be examined and adjusted. Of these, labor resources will be the most limiting. Golfer patience and understanding become even more important.

Now is a great time to contact your Green Section regional agronomist and arrange for a Turf Advisory Service visit. To find out more, visit www.usga.org and select the Course Care tab.