

Keeping Track

Accurate accounting of labor hours can illustrate the impact of budget changes and identify staffing needs.

BY DARIN BEVARD



How quickly labor hours can add up. Labor-intensive practices such as core aeration can consume most or all of the maintenance staff for an entire day, leaving little to no time for anything else to get done.

You get the news. The budget is going to change. How will this impact golf course maintenance operations? What more could be accomplished with additional resources? What tasks will not be completed or be performed less frequently if the maintenance budget is cut? Will you be able to answer these questions? The largest single line item in virtually every golf course maintenance budget is labor. Thus, when budgets are increased or decreased, funding for labor is likely to be at the top of the list of discussion topics.

It is surprising how few golf course superintendents have closely examined labor needs, at least not in the form of a detailed analysis. At some courses such a study has never been considered, while at others budgets are such that justification of staffing is simply not an issue. Most golf course superintendents broadly estimate the size of the staff needed to complete routine tasks, but rough estimates often lead to inaccurate information. Make no mistake, it takes significant time and effort to complete an initial labor audit and addi-

tional time to continue tracking hours over the span of an entire growing season, but it can be well worth it.

So why would you want to perform such an audit? For starters, this exercise can provide a clear picture of what can and cannot be completed, given labor resources within the framework of the existing maintenance budget. Too often, course officials suggest tasks that they wish to be completed in addition to routine maintenance that is already being performed. If resources are limited, this request may mean that a program that **needs** to be completed is eliminated or postponed in the interest of a task that someone **wants** to be completed. Even a few requests like this can soon result in declining turfgrass health or at least reduced playability in important playing areas. As many maintenance budgets have decreased, basic maintenance programs consume a higher percentage of available money, and there is less room for “extra” programs and projects or special requests. This is often a difficult concept to express to course officials. “How long can it really take to

do X, Y, or Z?” Green Section agronomists hear this question frequently when visiting golf courses. Having actual numbers illustrates very clearly how labor resources are deployed and why what seems to be a small project is still difficult to accomplish. When the costs of routine maintenance tasks are known, it is much easier to explain why extra tasks may not be absorbed into the existing budget.

GETTING STARTED

There are different methods of accounting for or tracking labor on a golf course. Software programs such as TRIMS or TurfCentric GCS, among others, are excellent tools to track all aspects of golf course management, including labor resources. However, specialized software is not the only way to perform a basic manpower audit. Simple tables constructed in spreadsheet or word-processing software can get you off to a great start.

Initially, keep the process simple. Focus on routine maintenance programs that are performed daily. These are the jobs that **must be done** regu-



Walk-mowing greens provides great putting surfaces, but at many facilities triplex mowing has partially or completely replaced walk mowing because of shrinking labor resources.



Mowing in general, and rough mowing in particular, consume the most labor at many courses. Converting primary rough to lower maintenance “no mow” areas can have a dramatic impact on available labor resources.

larly to maintain playing surfaces. This includes mowing of all turfgrass areas (greens, tees, fairways, approaches, collars, rough, etc.) and other routine maintenance tasks such as changing hole locations, raking bunkers, and the daily setup of the course. Tables can be developed to log and track the hours that are used for these activities. This information is derived from individual forms that allow employees to record the time it takes them to complete each maintenance task.

Once the information is gathered for basic maintenance, additional items can be added and tracked to see how the rest of available staff hours are being used or could be used. This may include landscaping for the clubhouse or golf course, edging around irrigation heads and distance markers, filling divots, irrigation repair, hand watering, etc. Abnormal and/or unpredictable activities, such as clearing debris after a storm, should be documented separately. Once the worksheets and accounting are completed, it should be easier to explain why any “small” project may be very difficult to complete during the growing season without postponing or compromising a routine maintenance activity or logging overtime. Additional concepts and information for creating a labor tracking program can be found at [Plan Your Work, Work Your Plan](#) and [A Labor of Love or a Love of Labor?](#)

USING THE DATA

A simplified case study can help illustrate the importance of knowing how many labor hours are available and how many are needed. Table 1 lists nine basic and routine maintenance tasks needed at almost every golf course. The number of employees, hours for each employee, and number of days per week each practice is performed are included. Course officials need to remember that these hours must be allocated over seven days. Some overtime may also be included, but this adds to labor costs.

If you have an eight-person crew, there are 320 labor hours available per week (8 employees x 40 hours per week). When you tally the total hours required for basic maintenance in this

example, 264 labor hours are needed each week. This leaves 56 labor hours to do anything else that needs to be done. Fifty-six hours sounds like a lot until you realize that this represents less than 1.5 hours per employee per day. Many facilities have less than 8 employees during the growing season, so available time beyond basic maintenance is limited, and this needs to be communicated.

To illustrate how tracking labor hours can be beneficial in explaining potential program changes to course officials, consider the following. A switch to triplex mowing of putting greens in the previous example would require just 2 employees at about 2.5 hours per day, or 5 total labor hours daily. This simple change would free up 30 hours per week to do other tasks! While triplex mowing of greens brings into the equation other factors that must be considered (many of which are negative), in terms of



There are only so many hours in a day and every task should be accounted for. Irrigation repair may take one or more employees away from routine maintenance, and it could be the reason that bunkers did not get raked that day or hole locations were not changed.

labor, this would make a big difference. Looking beyond greens, rough mowing accounts for over 25 percent of total labor hours used in this example. Converting areas of rough to lower maintenance “no mow” areas can greatly reduce the hours needed for

mowing primary rough and could free up resources for other activities. Documentation of time spent caring for each area of the golf course can make these programs easier for everyone to understand and accept.

Budget reductions at many facilities are the new normal, and the golf course maintenance staff can only squeeze so much juice out of the lemon. Many times, the decision makers at a golf facility do not realize the time required for routine maintenance practices. Assigning **accurate** numbers to maintenance tasks, especially the most basic and routine activities, helps clarify how much labor is needed to care for a golf course. Tracking labor hours is a great educational tool for everyone.

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	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1										
2	Activity			Employees	Hours	Days Per Week		Hours Per Week		
3										
4	Putting Green Mowing			5	2	6			60	
5	Fairway Mowing			2	6	3			36	
6	Tee Mowing			2	3	3			18	
7	Approach Mowing			2	3	3			18	
8	Collar Mowing			1	3	3			9	
9	Intermediate Rough Mowing			1	3	3			9	
10	Rough Mowing			2	7	5			70	
11	Bunker Maintenance			2	7	2			28	
12	Changing Holes			2	2	4			16	
13							Total Hours		264	
14										

Table 1: A simple worksheet can be developed to track labor hours required to complete basic golf course maintenance activities. Additional maintenance categories can be added as needed to provide full accounting of labor.