

MONEY TALKS

Quantify maintenance costs to qualify a request for course closure.

by KEITH HAPP



Aerification is an essential management tool, and by timing the treatment correctly, maximum benefit can be obtained. This is one reason why more and more golf courses are choosing to close for a short period when conditions are optimal to do what is best for the turf.

CLOSING the golf course for turf maintenance activities can be a difficult concept to sell to golfers. A common response to such a request may be, "No way! The weather will be perfect then; we can't give up the course." All too often, agronomic programs are compromised to avoid golfer inconvenience, and this frequently occurs with aerification practices. Aerification is one maintenance program that, if postponed until later in the season, is often much more disruptive to play. For example, if this cultural treatment is delayed until later in the fall, recovery can also be delayed. Changing environmental conditions, such as lower temperature, soil moisture, and decreasing day length, may not allow for most rapid recovery. Prolonged recovery just perpetuates the perception that aerification serves only as a process to aggravate golfers rather than prepare the turf properly for play.

Ken Flisek, golf course superintendent at The Club at Nevillewood, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, put forth a plan to accomplish all necessary agronomic cultural treatments during the summer. In fact, he proposed closing the course for four days during the third week of August. Ken knows that the timing of aerification is as important as

the aerification technique itself. Communicating to his golfers that the timing of the treatment should coincide with active turf growth and that the optimum time to aerify is when the turf looks the best, was not enough to sell the concept of closing the course to his members. However, aerification is often referred to as the cornerstone of a turfgrass management program, and with this philosophy in mind Ken searched for additional information to further substantiate his request for course closure.

Agronomic reasons for aerifying at the right time of year were presented to the Green Committee. There were distinct concerns about thatch accumulation, soil compaction, and seedbed preparation. In addition, the cost of the entire agronomic effort was quantified. Expenditures for green, tee, and fairway treatments were \$8,708, \$8,021, and \$18,937, respectively. The total cost for aerification was \$35,666, and this cost was going to be incurred regardless of when the treatments were performed. It is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the cost of not aerifying at the most favorable time. However, Ken wanted to do everything possible to shift away from a position of having to react to problems and treating symp-

toms. His position centered on doing what was right both agronomically and economically for course conditioning. Why not complete the process when the weather was conducive to receiving the greatest value possible from the maintenance investment? Initiating the process during the summer also ensured that sufficient labor resources were available to complete the tasks at hand, within the time frame allotted, and without compromising other agronomic or maintenance issues for the rest of the course.

While many skeptical golfers considered this a great sacrifice, they soon realized the benefits. When the process was completed in a timely fashion, the turf healed rapidly and uniformly. In fact, when golfers returned following the course closure, over most areas it was difficult to tell that aerification had taken place. Turf quality was excellent and course playability was not compromised. The turf was prepared well for the remainder of the golfing season and the winter weather ahead. One major benefit the golfers enjoyed from the course closure in August was that they could look forward to uninterrupted play during the late summer and entire fall. The turf maintenance crew benefited because they could focus on leaf removal and other seasonal course maintenance activities during the fall. For all involved, the short course closure has been a win-win scenario.

There are many uncontrollable factors that affect turf quality and its performance. To prepare golf course turf in general and putting green turf in particular, the need to be proactive is distinct and real. Being proactive begins by communicating the importance of doing what is right for the turf so that playing conditions can meet the standards desired by the golfers.

If aerification has been difficult to schedule and complete, give Ken's strategy a try. Take the time to quantify maintenance costs to help substantiate a request for adequate time to complete necessary agronomic programs when they can be of greatest value to the turf.

KEITH HAPP is an agronomist in the Green Section's Mid-Atlantic Region, based in Pittsburgh, Pa.