

# Golf's Environmental Message: Old News or New?

Now is not the time to be complacent with golf's environmental issues.

BY KIMBERLY S. ERUSHA, MATT NELSON, AND DAVE WIENECKE

**G**olf courses are good for the environment." "Golf's guide to environmental stewardship." "Environmental commitment on the golf course." How many times have you heard these types of statements over the past 15 years? Be that as it may, environmental awareness and activism is not old news; it will remain a core issue for the golf industry for decades to come.

Safeguarding environmental quality should continue to be a primary goal of the golf industry. Yet, too often, Green Section staff members hear golf course officials and staff comment, "We're doing all of that" or "It's time to move on to a new issue" or "I'm tired of hearing about IPM." More subtly, they watch a person's eyes glaze over at the mention of environmental issues.

Although research studies demonstrate that proper turfgrass management does not threaten environmental quality, as an industry we cannot afford to claim victory too early. Without due diligence when making day-to-day management decisions and continually communicating the responsible efforts taken to care for the environment, the golf industry is only one misapplication away from receiving a black eye and finding itself scrambling to improve its environmental image yet again.

Pesticide and water issues alone should be enough motivation to convince superintendents and course officials that the golf industry needs to remain actively involved in environmental stewardship. These topics will loom on the horizon for many years. Several communities throughout the United States and beyond are lobbying

for the elimination of all synthetic pesticide and fertilizer use on turf areas, including golf courses. In 2002, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that municipalities were allowed to ban the use of lawn pesticides. In 2004, legislation in Suffolk County, N.Y., proposed to ban the cosmetic use of pesticides by homeowners and lawn care operators.

Effective January 1, 2005, Madison, Wis., and Dane County (Wis.) enacted legislation stating that "no person shall apply any lawn fertilizer within Dane County that is labeled as containing more than 0% phosphorus or other compound containing phosphorus." This ordinance applies to golf courses and all other turfgrass areas. Similar legislation was enacted in Minnesota in 2005. While phosphorus may be applied when the need is demonstrated by a soil test, there is some concern about the precedent set by this legislation. Animated debates continue as lawn care operators and golf course managers cope with fertilizer- and pesticide-banning legislation.

Water quantity and quality have been prevalent problems in the Southwest for many years. Other parts of the country experience similar situations when faced with periodic droughts. In 2002, the Denver area experienced a significant water shortage due to an extended drought, and irrigation water for golf courses was completely cut off at city-operated facilities. Golf courses responded to the challenge by reducing water usage by 11% and increasing their use of recycled water.

Water consumption and pesticide usage will surely gain more attention

and discussion in the future. The question that comes to mind then is, "What does the golf industry need to do to better address these issues?"

## OLD NEWS

"The environmental message is old news." There is no time like the present to get used to the idea of environmental quality on golf courses. Environmental issues are here to stay, and the Green Section staff agrees that we are only getting started with the critical debates. Issues such as biological controls, wildlife habitat, pesticide exposure, and others are going to accelerate in the not-so-distant future. The industry needs to follow and understand local environmental policy. This means paying attention to issues impacting your community and being discussed at your city or environmental commission meetings. Be aware of the people in your community who are involved with environmental policy, including elected officials. Take the time to introduce yourself and maintain contact with them so that they feel comfortable contacting you with questions about your industry and vice versa.

Consider the actions of the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association. In February 2005 the association, along with other green industry partners in the state, took part in a "Day on the Hill." After a training session on how to properly present their information, golf course superintendents met with state legislators to discuss the size and impact of the green industry on the state's economy and their proactive concern for the environment. Similarly,

the Cactus and Pine Golf Course Superintendents Association (Arizona) and the Golf Course Superintendents Association of Southern California have had encouraging results with their lobbying efforts.

When you hear of impending legislation in your local community, do not assume that the golf industry is aware of it. Raise the topic at your local golf association or chapter meeting. Contact the GCSAA to make them aware of the issue. Participate in pertinent town meetings so that the discussion is based on factual information about golf course maintenance practices. Be prepared with facts about your own facility. Designate a committee of golf course superintendents within your local association who will coordinate the activities in your area. This group will be critical in keeping the golf industry aware of environmental issues and, when necessary, *rallying the troops* when the need arises.

Eastern Long Island, N.Y., golf course superintendents accepted the challenge from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the fall of 2004 to protect the health of the local Peconic Estuary and other water bodies on eastern Long Island. Mike Rewinski, golf course superintendent at Westhampton Country Club, became part of the citizens advisory committee working on this issue. He rallied golf course superintendents to participate, and nearly 90% of the area golf courses agreed to reduce fertilizer use to limit the amount of nitrogen that enters the groundwater by developing comprehensive nitrogen management plans.

Fifteen California golf associations banded together to form the California Golf Alliance for Water in 2003. Their goal is to educate its members, lobby lawmakers, and influence public opinion about golf course water use. A USGA Regional Conference was held in 2004 with a similar idea, bringing together regulators and turfgrass managers to discuss water regulations and public perceptions of golf course water use.



Golf course superintendents are the front lines of communication with the golfing public. Take advantage of these interactions to positively influence a person's opinion about the golf industry.



Water quantity and water quality issues know no geographic boundaries. The southwest United States has faced a multi-year drought, and other parts of the country experience similar situations when faced with periodic droughts.



What is the condition of your golf course maintenance facility? The maintenance area holds the greatest potential for environmental degradation at a course, but a little common sense and a well-conceived plan can go a long way to provide excellent safeguards.

### DOESN'T APPLY

"I'm doing things right on the golf course. That doesn't apply to me." Have you completed a *written* environmental plan for your golf course? It is fine to tell people that you do a significant amount for the environment while caring for the golf course, but the statement is much more powerful when it is documented in a written format. This "action form" gives your environmental plan greater value and allows it to be shown to anyone.

Do you need help in jump-starting your environmental plan? Audubon International's Cooperative Sanctuary Program is just a phone call away and will provide an outline of questions to get you started.

Is your maintenance facility, including the wash rack area, in order? Turf Advisory Service visits reveal that many golf courses don't pay enough attention to the maintenance area. There are numerous examples of wash rack areas that drain directly into water bodies, mix and load areas that are not properly contained, and fertilizer/pesticide storage areas that leave a lot to be desired. The maintenance facility arguably presents the greatest potential for

environmental degradation at a golf course, but a little common sense and a well-conceived plan can provide excellent safeguards.

Do you have adequate buffer zones around your golf course water features? Buffers have a positive effect on filtering water, and the potential exists to remove 97-98% of sediments and chemicals in runoff, depending on the storm. That is not to say that runoff will not occur. University research (Oklahoma State University, University of Georgia, and University of Illinois) demonstrates that the amount of soil moisture present before the storm takes place has a significant impact on the amount of runoff. The golf course superintendent still needs to make responsible decisions as to what, how, and when a product is applied, regardless of buffer widths and composition. If soil is moist from a previous rain or irrigation and is then inundated by a two-inch-per-hour downpour, runoff will be produced, whether or not buffers are present, and pesticide or fertilizer applications should be avoided under these conditions. Established buffers, weather forecasting technology, and proper irrigation management can help

limit offsite fertilizer or pesticide transport. A written plan helps ensure that the proper maintenance practices are followed and that a conscious commitment to environmental quality is made.

There can be complaints from golfers that higher mowed turf near the water's edge produces an unkempt look. Although there has not been a direct comparison between non-mowed and three-inch-tall turf buffers, there is good evidence that three-inch buffers can prevent almost as much sediment and chemicals from leaving the fairway in runoff water as unmowed buffers. The bottom line is that mow-low-to-the-edge-of-the-water is a risky scenario to follow. Marking the hazard boundary above the buffer is one way to help address playability concerns with the Rules of Golf.

These are just a few examples of how to get your course in order. If your own actions will not stand up to scrutiny, then it will reflect poorly on the industry as a whole.

### ARE YOU COMMUNICATING CLEARLY?

Golf course superintendents are on the front line when it comes to communicating with the public about golf course management. Bruce Williams, CGCS at the Los Angeles Country Club (Los Angeles, Calif.), often challenges superintendents to have an *elevator speech* ready when those often-asked questions come up as to what your job entails. He defines this opportunity as approximately 30 to 45 seconds to get your message across, addressing not just who you are ("I take care of the golf course."), but taking it one step further in answering what you do and how you make life better on the golf course ("I'm responsible for the golf course turf and the surrounding environment. That includes making the golf course better each day for the golfers and also improving the environment for the wildlife that utilize the golf course.").

Most golf course superintendents are familiar with the questions that come up repetitively. For example, "What do you do for a living?" or "Don't golf courses use a lot of pesticides and water?" Develop and practice what you would say in response to commonly asked questions, and determine how you would give the questioner one point to think about after your conversation. Look upon these interactions as tremendous opportunities to positively influence a person's opinion about the golf course industry.

## WORKING TOGETHER

The USGA is not letting its guard down regarding environmental issues. Over the past 20 years, we have dedicated significant time and resources focusing on the environment, and we continue to provide research grants that address environmental issues related to golf.

The responsibility is not the USGA's alone, however, and we need your help with this mission. If the golf industry wants to make headway on solving some of its environmental challenges and impacting the opinions of the

critics, then that effort must take place on the grass-roots level. Each golf course superintendent has success stories, but time must be taken to document and share them with golfers and those outside the industry. Golf course superintendents are on the front lines every day, dealing with golfers, course officials, and local legislators. The environmental message of this industry does not need to be delivered in a grandiose public relations campaign. Progress is made by documenting and publicizing the good environmental deeds of individual golf courses as we strive to be a model industry for others to follow. The best campaign for golf's environmental message will be accomplished through the diligent and committed effort of everyone connected with this industry, one person at a time.

## REFERENCES

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**The following Long Island, N.Y., golf courses are participating in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Peconic Estuary Program. Working in conjunction with the EPA, Cornell University, the USGA, and New York State officials, the golf courses have pledged to reduce fertilizer use.**

Atlantic Golf Club  
 Bridgehampton Club  
 Calverton Links  
 Cedars Golf Course  
 East Hampton Golf Club  
 Fox Hill Golf & Country Club  
 Friar's Head  
 Gardiners Bay Country Club  
 Goat Hill at Shelter Island Country Club  
 Great Rock Golf Club  
 Hampton Hills Golf & Country Club  
 Indian Island Golf Course  
 Islands End Golf & Country Club  
 Laurel Links Country Club  
 Long Island Golf Club  
 Maidstone Club  
 Montauk Downs  
 National Golf Links of America  
 North Fork Country Club  
 Noyac Golf Club  
 Old Vine Country Club  
 Pine Hills Golf Club  
 Poxabogue Golf Course  
 Quogue Field Club  
 Rock Hill Golf & Country Club  
 Sag Harbor Golf Club  
 Southampton Golf Club  
 Shinnecock Hills Golf Club  
 South Fork Country Club  
 The Bridge  
 Westhampton Country Club



The eastern Long Island, N.Y., golf course superintendents are working cooperatively with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to help reduce nitrogen impacts on the local Peconic Estuary and other water bodies on eastern Long Island. The golf courses have developed comprehensive nitrogen management plans and will participate in joint site visits conducted by Cornell University and the USGA.