

It's Time to Commit

Operational efficiency depends on it.

BY KEITH A. HAPP



By timing agronomic practices when they will be most beneficial to the turf, recovery time is reduced and long-term playing quality is more likely to be achieved.

Each year during Course Consultation Service (CCS) visits, questions are posed by golfers and club officials concerning adjustments in agronomic practices and procedures with the sole intent of “not inconveniencing golf” during the season. As USGA agronomists, our first response is, “Sure, practices can be implemented in the offseason to minimize golfer inconveniences, but doing so may significantly compromise desired results.” If questions pertain to a renovation project and the estimated cost per square foot is higher than expected, the response from the superintendent may be something along the lines of, “We can do it in-house or we don’t have to use that method or those materials.” These responses may not be what golfers want to hear, but when the focus is achieving desired playing conditions, there can be only one answer regarding agronomic

procedures or a renovation project. Commit to doing the procedure or project when it is best for the grass and do it right the first time.

Aeration is the number-one topic for these discussions. Naturally, golfers desire to schedule aeration at a time of year when it does not interfere with play. However, shifting away from the optimal aeration time when it is best for the grass will reduce the benefits of aeration and prolong recovery time. The number-one defense against pest pressure from weeds and disease is healthy, dense grass. Realistically, the minor inconvenience of aeration does not outweigh the long-term benefits of well-timed agronomic procedures that promote healthier turf and more consistent playing quality throughout the season. Aerating too early in the spring or too late in the fall will not achieve the same effect as performing the practice when grass is most actively growing.

Golfers don’t want to play when it is too cold and grass doesn’t grow vigorously when it is too cold. If playing quality is the priority at your facility, then commit to providing every opportunity to achieve that goal.

Other hot topics discussed during course consultations are bunkers and bunker playability. Bunkers are hazards and, by nature, are inconsistent. Thus, there is no such thing as a consistent hazard. Furthermore, golfers complain about the playability of these features when the primary problems are typically related to issues that go beyond daily maintenance. For instance, sand that is too firm or too wet is likely caused by poor bunker drainage or insufficient sand depth and has nothing to do with daily maintenance.

The cost of a renovation project is always a concern, and the full scope of the project must be considered to achieve long-term success. Working

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within the footprint of problem bunkers can reduce costs, but restricting the scope of work may not address all of the issues that are causing problems. Adding sand to a bad bunker that does not drain well or is contaminated with soil does not address the issues that led to these problems in the first place. A “bad bunker” will still be a “bad bunker” if drainage issues inside and outside of the bunker are not addressed. When constructed well and with proper sand depths, bunkers can be more efficiently maintained and more likely to meet player expectations.

When it comes to renovating bunkers, renovating a few each year is far better than not doing any at all. If 40 bunkers need attention but only eight are renovated in a given year, progress is still being made. Commit to doing the project in a manner that allows for the best possible outcome. Install sufficient drainage and, if necessary, install bunker liners to aid sand stability. Utilize the services of an [accredited soil physical testing laboratory](#) to test sand options (especially if considering a sand unfamiliar to you or your area). Also, make sure to allocate adequate

funding to complete the work properly and on time.

Plant breeders have developed grasses that are more tolerant of heat, cold, and other stress factors. We are consulting with and advising an increasing number of golf facilities to consider newer, improved turf varieties for their greens and fairways. However, conflict often arises during these discussions, and it usually involves the potential disruption the project will cause rather than focusing on the positive outcomes the project can deliver. Golfers are in favor of installing more sustainable grasses that offer more consistent playing conditions, but closing the course to establish new turf is the stumbling block.

To establish turf from seed, the work must be performed when the grass can grow and develop. It is unrealistic to expect that success can be achieved by conducting a regrassing project during the winter or even during the extreme shoulder portions of the year with seeding. Sodding may be an option, but this increases project cost. Short-term inconvenience is the price for long-term improvements in

playing quality. It is essential to commit to the proper timeline in order to achieve the best possible outcome.

Do not let the implementation of a major renovation or a foundational agronomic program get derailed by the fear of disrupting golfers. While some debate and degree of compromise can be healthy, commit first to making the project successful. There can be no compromise on this point. We seldom see operations saving their way to prosperity, but we do work with facilities that invest in sound agronomic procedures and reap long-term success. Achieving operational efficiency to meet golfer expectations, whether it is in the maintenance of the course or by the elimination of chronic maintenance problems, depends on committing to the best outcome possible.

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Commit to investing in renovations that fix problems and enhance operational efficiency, such as improving drainage in this water-filled bunker.