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By Peter Blais

Aerator patent not enforceable

A federal judge has ruled the patent on a pond aeration device used on golf courses is unenforceable because the manufacturer obtained it improperly.

U.S. District Judge Donald Alsop ruled Feb. 20 that Daniel Durda, chairman and chief executive officer of Aeration Industries Inc. of Chaska, Minn., altered documents to obtain the patent.

By Kit Bradshaw

USGA specs under fire, face change

The heat is on for change to the United States Golf Association's specifications for greens construction, which have been reduced to pamphlet size since the original one-inch-thick document.

Depending on the source, these specifications, an industry-wide standard for three decades:

• Are not based on sound scientific rationales.
• Have a problem in the

Idaho legislators nix field burning bill

By Bob Spivak

BOISE, Idaho — The state Legislature on March 6 quashed a bill to limit the burning of turfgrass fields in Idaho, which produces tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass for the nation.

Burning has proved the most cost-effective method of controlling disease and pests in the fields, but has been opposed by environmentalists who decry the black smoke from the fires every fall.

The opposition came to a head in 1988 when a windshift pushed the smoke from a burning field across a major highway in Oregon, causing a 37-car collision and fatally injuring seven persons.

Prior to the Legislature's
Continued from page 1

The problem of the (new) alternative system is that it wasn’t adequately tested before being used on golf courses.

— Dr. James Beard

choker layer, thought by many to be too expensive and often too difficult to obtain, and therefore eliminated from many greens.

• A non-specific concerning the organic composition in the root zone mixture.
• Have not been the cause of greens failures.
• Are important, and have 30 years of actual use behind them.
• Need to be updated.
• Are controversial.
• All of the above.

Bob Vavrek, an agronomist with the Great Lakes Region of the USGA Green Section, said: We know the Green Section greens haven’t failed yet. We’d rather stick with our specs because they work.

Even those who have concerns about the USGA greens specifications are quick to point out their validity.

Golf course architect Edward Connor, president of Golfforms in Ponce Inlet, Fla., and a member of the USGA Greens Committee, said: “It is important to create USGA greens. I live and die by it. A properly built USGA green hasn’t failed yet.”

But Dr. James Beard of Texas A&M University, an internationally known turfgrass authority, has problems with the current USGA specifications on greens.

“The USGA system as originally developed back in the 1950s and 1960s, and modified in the 1970s, is based on good science and detailed research,” Beard said. “But the problem of the alternative system is that it wasn’t adequately tested before being used on golf courses. You should do the research first, sort out the bugs and problems, and then use the system.”

There are several layers to this controversy, just as there are to a green.

The bottom layer of a green has the least amount of controversy. The bottom can be of limestone and pea gravel, such as in Florida; decomposed granite, as they use in California; or crushed shale, such as is used in West Virginia. Basically, the material should be clean and chemically and physically inert. So far, so good.

The next layer becomes more controversial. Called the choker layer, it essentially is designed to partially interrupt the flow of water through the subsurface of the green.

The USGA specs require this choker layer to be of larger or coarser type of sand.

Connor said: “In the past, the choker layer was treated with the respect of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But the choker layer is important. I asked a lab ... why it is important, and they said that when a golf course comes to them with a problem on the green, the first thing they want is a core sample of the green profile. When they cut the profile open — and they’ve done more than 1,000 — they have never found a properly constructed USGA green sample. In other words, a properly built USGA green hasn’t failed yet — in their experience.”

The only problem with the choker layer, according to Connor, is in the availability of the materials. “Sometimes it is impossible to find choker-size sand in an already manufactured state,” he said. “You need 1,000 tons for a golf course and this could cost $40 to $50 per ton.

“It costs about 12 cents a ton to move one ton one mile. So for every mile away from the job you go, you are adding cost to the choker.”

This added cost, Connor said, is why some course developers decide not to include the choker layer in the greens. “To eliminate the choker layer is to compromise the green,” he said.

However, he admitted that one of the problems may be in the USGA specifications themselves.

“In 1982, the specifications said the choker layer’s worth wasn’t proven. There was nothing clandestine about it. The specs said it might or might not be necessary,” Connor said. “But this language left an opening, and a lot of people drove through it.”

Chuck Dixon, vice president of technical operations for International Sports Turf Research Center, Inc. in Olathe, Kan., has problems with several parts of the specifications.

“If you go back and look at the records, you see that the USGA said it was OK to have a USGA green without the choker. I’m not
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REGIONAL GUIDELINES

Many in the industry believe regional specifications would make sense.

"The climate is involved. The turf is involved," Gockel said. "There are other aspects like organic selection and sand gradation (to consider)... What's good in Northern Michigan is not necessarily so for Houston." Connor said that although he thinks regional criteria would help, it could be as difficult to have regional specifications as it is having national ones. He said perhaps a difference should be drawn between the types of turfgrass and soil requirements from one region to another.

"I think the specs are trying to cover a lot of territory, and regionalization may not be the answer," Connor said. "The problem now is that the specs are too precise, they are difficult to meet.

"These specs imply that if you are outside their range in any category, you don't have a USGA green."

"We should be more aware of regional differences," Connor said. "For instance, we worried about using limestone in Florida but now it seems we can use native rocks. We had been importing material that often cost nine to 10 times more."

The USGA's Vavrek is aware of the controversial nature of the greens' specifications, and the organization is attempting to look at several areas of difficulty.

"For one thing," he said, "how do you characterize peat or organic materials? It's important to have clean peat, and even in the peat field you can have silt and clay.

We are talking to universities right now to see if they are testing peat. And also, we are involved in doing a historical review of the specifications to help solve some of these problems."