Dwindling research funds force firms' hands

Cutbacks in federal funding have colleges across the country scrambling to preserve programs that once seemed a matter of course, so to speak. With the recession showing lukewarm signs of dissipation, a restoration of federal university support appears unlikely.

What does this mean to the golf industry? Plenty.

The wise allocation of research dollars is now a tougher prospect, as large university facilities struggle to fund experimentation that, until recently, may have been taken for granted.

"We're basically limited by the amount of research money we have coming in from the outside," said Dr. Hank Wilkinson of the University of Illinois. "If companies don't come up with their own research, they'll walk behind the best."

Hal Phillips
editor

The problem is simple: Less government funding means less research, and Wilkinson has seen the effect of federal chintz firsthand as associate professor of turfgrass research in the Department of Plant Pathology/Agronomy.

At a recent industry function held at Jacklin Seed Co. in Post Falls, Idaho, Wilkinson addressed a crowd of seed folks outside the Jacklin research laboratory and greenhouse.

"I can tell you right now that we don't have a greenhouse anywhere near this good at the University of Illinois," he said with a hint of admiration and melancholy.

The message was clear: Don't count on academia to provide the amount of research it has in the past. If the golf industry is to move forward industry members must take the research lead, because colleges and universities simply can't afford it any longer.

Yet it's not quite that simple. With money at more of a premium, research will follow the dollars. In other words, cash-strapped research facilities will be more likely to conduct special interest testing at the behest of, say, Company X.

"The problem is this: The interest of Company X might not be that of the state, country or even the industry," said Wilkinson. "It's a real dangerous pitfall."

The way Wilkinson sees it, there are three kinds of research:

1) Practical research, which solves a problem.

2) Demonstrative research, which proves a point.

Dr. Hank Wilkinson and his wife, Tess, at Jacklin Seed Co. in June.

And 3) Futuristic research, which focuses on "the cutting edge" rather than "the practical."

"Companies are far more likely, at this point, to fund 1) and 2) —

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Golf industry is not insulated from 'society of bizarrity'

People in the golf industry are glad to point out during times of recession that golf is recession-proof — or at least recession-resistant. Golf play goes up when employment rates go down.

But is the golf industry insulated from insanity? Before dismissing this question, out of hand, take a closer look.

We are living in what I call a "society of bizarrity." (I know that isn't a word, but it is based on the word "bizarre," so please hang in there with me.)

Recall the aftermath of the verdict setting free the police officers accused of beating Rodney King. Riots ensued in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Minneapolis, even Montreal. What the poor business owners in Los Angeles had to do with the acquittal of the policemen was beyond anyone's imagination. But their businesses got trashed.

Mark Leslie
managing editor

I thought, *Those rioters really need a reason to vent their anger. Any cause for a riot.*

But then along came an incident in Boston. People giving a free concert had to close the doors when the auditorium filled up. So-o-o, what else **could** we expect from those poor abused people left outside but to riot?

That riot set the record straight: In today's world people do not need any real reason to riot. Make-believe reasons will do.

And that's when I started pondering the golf industry's insulation — or lack thereof — against insanity in a society of bizarrity.

I remembered the Indian tribe in Quebec which armed its members with rifles and took over a golf course. They piled cars into a barricade to keep people out and held off Mounties and other authorities for weeks. That golf course certainly was not insulated from bizarrity.

A Maryland architect, Davis Love, told me of a golf course project which drew out environmentalists in force. They didn't want the course built, they said, because it would infringe on the wildlife. Yet, a couple of miles

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Letters

To the editor:

I read with great interest your article "Backers, skeptics assess mesh-grid technology" (Vol 4, Number 6, June 1992).

As the developers of the mesh element system referred to in your article we are extremely pleased that you have brought the concept to the attention of your readers.

On balance, the article gave a fair coverage of the potential benefits of the system, which we refer to as the Netlon Advanced Turf system.

We are, however, concerned that you have attempted to achieve "balance" in the article by countering the positive statements made by Mr. Sifers with the more "sceptical" comments of your editorial adviser, Mr. Hurdzan.

Whilst we have no objections to this approach, we feel that the overall effect was to create the impression that both Mr. Sifers and Mr. Hurdzan were giving their opinions on the system. Indeed, your sub-heading "Opinions differ on capabilities of mesh reinforcement technology" reinforced this impression.

The important difference between Mr. Sifers' comments and those of Mr. Hurdzan is that whilst Mr. Hurdzan was quite reasonably providing his opinions, Mr. Sifers was responding to direct questions by providing factual statements on the major research program conducted at Texas A&M University from 1985 to date (i.e. seven years!).

When Mr. Sifers stated that moisture content in the mesh elements rootzone was always slightly higher than in an equivalent non-mesh rootzone, he was referring to extensive studies undertaken over a two-year period.

Measurements were taken at four seasonal periods, at three soil depths on a large number of randomly arranged trial plots. The increased soil moisture content is, therefore, a fact and not a "claim" as stated in your quote from Mr. Hurdzan.

In a similar way, statements regarding reduced divot size and enhanced recovery rates due to the mesh elements inclusion are also based on extensive research data.

When Dr. Beard stated in the abstract of his paper to the GCSAA conference that "mesh element inclusion in high sand rootzones substantially reduced divot width and length" and that "recovery of the divot openings was more than twice as rapid," he was summarizing the factual observations obtained from five major field plot investigations conducted since 1985 and three ongoing studies. That is not an "opinion" but a reasoned scientific observation.

Finally, Mr. Hurdzan justified his scepticism to a certain extent by his statement that "if this stuff is so great, why haven't people started using it?"

That is a very fair comment. The answer is very simple.

As a reputable company with a very long history, we have chosen not to promote the system in the U.S. until we had adequate research data to confirm the product's benefits. There have been a small number of installations in the U.S. during this time, including the Santa Anita racetrack project mentioned in your article.

These have arisen as a result of clients approaching us directly, having learned of the success of the system elsewhere.

The reason Mr. Hurdzan has not seen people use the system is that until this year, we have not been promoting the system in the U.S.

We are currently in the process of assembling a network of distributors to cover North America. The first of these have now been appointed.

Texas A&M University is due to publish a Research Bulletin later this year which will summarize the research carried out on mesh elements to date.

We shall be pleased to forward a copy to you when available. Perhaps you could report in detail on the major research findings as a follow-up to the article in question.

Once again, we thank you for introducing this topic to your readers.

Kind regards,
Tim Oliver
International manager
Netlon Advanced
Turf Systems

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