Rodenticides: A pesty PR problem for supers

BY PETER B LAI S

The public may not like fun-
gicides or insecticides, but no one measurs the passing of fungi or bugs. Not so prairie dogs, ground squirrels, voles and even mice. Thus the use of rodenticides can be a more ticklish situation.

"I've found that people complain a lot less if I contract with a company to remove animals than if we do it ourselves," said Dennis Lyon, the city of Aurora (Colo.) manager of golf.

Public relations is a problem. Yet so are rodents, both to playing conditions and golfers themselves. Prairie dogs, for instance, may appear cute and cuddly. But their holes have caused broken legs and sprained ankles. And they are carriers of the virus that causes bubonic plague, Lyon noted.

Club members have little patience with a superintendent who allows voles to leave burrows running through the center of a green without taking action. And cash-strapped cities would soon bid sayonara to the super who allowed mice and rats to merrily eat their way through stored supplies of grass seed.

So, whether they choose to treat the problem themselves or contract out, dealing with rodenticides is part of a superintendent's job.

Relocating animals, rather than killing them, is good public relations. In fact, the public may not like funny gophers, but diversely going through Colorado's Front Range 13 years ago.

"I noticed a lot of people were having pest small animal problems. They'd try everything until finally they'd end up calling somebody like me," said the operator of Animal Relocators.

Foxes, raccoons, muskrats, prairie dogs, skunks, squirrels, boes. You name it, Helgeson was being called on to remove it. In between checking his fur traps, that is.

Being an entrepreneur at heart, he soon realized catching and relocating small animals was a potential business by itself. He started on a part-time basis. "But within four to five months, I was at it full time," he said.

Over the past baker's-dozen years, Helgeson's Prey, Inc., has been contracted by Highland Hills Municipal Golf Course in Greeley (skunks), Rolling Hills Country Club in Golden (muskrat), Columbine Country Club in Littleton (bees, fox, raccoon) and Castle Pines Golf Club in Castle Rock (bees).

"Golf courses have been a pretty fair market for us," the former trapper said. "There just aren't that many people who do it only for the public." Helgeson, according to Robert Corrigan, a vertebrate pest specialist at Purdue University.

"They are a significant problem in most parts of the U.S.," Corrigan said. "They push up mounds and tunnels, sometimes right up onto greens."

Moles are technically insectivores, not rodents. Rodenticides are sometimes effective against them, but not always. Traps sometimes work better and are available at any hardware store, Corrigan said.

Traps and glue boards are also frequently used in seed storage areas to control mice and rats. Crowder added. "I can't imagine a place that stores seed that doesn't have a potential mouse problem," Crowder said.

Lyon deals with this by storing little if any seed.

"We try to buy only what we plan to use right away," he said. If that isn't possible, there are precautions superintendents can take.

"We've had some very difficult times removing foxes," Helgeson said. "If you corner a skunk in the wrong place..."

Relocating animals, rather than killing them, is good public relations. In fact, the thought of even catching the poor creatures is so distasteful to some, that many superintendents prefer to turn the job over to an outside contractor rather than do it themselves and face the wrath of members, neighbors and the public.

"One sure thing in this business is that no matter what you do or how you do it, someone won't approve when it comes to moving animals," Helgeson said.

The other predictable thing is that animals are always unpredictable.

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