OLYMPIC VALLEY, Calif. — To the legions of skiers who visit the Resort at Squaw Creek each winter, the vast snow-covered meadow that skirts the resort is a haven of cross-country trails. But to Mike Carlson, it’s one of the most environmentally sensitive golf courses in America — merely hibernating until spring arrives to the High Sierra.

Carlson, the superintendent for the award-winning Resort at Squaw Creek Golf Course nestled at the base of Squaw Valley USA, just finished presiding over the annual removal of the snowy tarp that covers the 18-hole, Robert Trent Jones Jr. layout. With a target opening date of May 24 and some of the toughest environmental regulations in the country governing the process, Carlson and his team had their work cut out to prepare the course for another season of mountain golf.

“We’ve had more than 20 feet of snow this winter, but we expect to open on schedule,” said Carlson, who supervises a staff of two assistant superintendents, one mechanic and 20 grounds crew members.

Topdressing and spreading organic materials with one affordable machine

The mid-sized Millcreek Topdressing/Spreader is more versatile than greens-only topdressing machines, 1/3 the price of large-area topdressing machines. Starting under $6000," it’s a non-torquing, non-hydraulic workhorse that’s easy to operate, and as reliable as they come.

Now you can topdress, plus spread compost, disperse clippings, fill bunkers, break-and-disperse aeration plugs, apply lime, wood chip and more — all with one affordable machine. More and more superintendents are finding the smaller Model 50 ideal for tees and greens at night to trap in heat. "We’ve had more than 20 feet of snow this winter, but we expect to open on schedule," said Carlson, who supervises a staff of two assistant superintendents, one mechanic and 20 grounds crew members.

The stringent guidelines, established by a technical review committee under an agreement with the neighboring community, permit Carlson to maintain the grounds with only six products, mainly water-soluble fertilizers.

"Instead of pesticides, we invest in springtime manpower for removing snow, and for sodding and seeding any damaged greens," Carlson said. "Once all the remaining snow has melted, we put a geo-textile fiber cover on the greens at night to trap in heat."

As a result of the work by Carlson and his crew, the greens are not "lush," and are actually barely alive. But that's the objective: to impose the minimum synthetic input possible on the natural environment. The brownish hue of the rough, which to the casual observer may appear to reflect neglect, in fact demonstrates a calculated effort to preserve the area in its natural state.

The pesticide-free management program is only one aspect of the environmentally sensitive design and course management methods. Course architect Robert Trent Jones Jr. and RTJII vice president of design Kyle Phillips planned the course with environmental sensitivity as their highest priority.

By creating minimal play areas to avoid displacing native zones, they produced a course that, with just 80 playable acres, is fun and challenging, but small by industry standards. They incorporated raised wooden cart paths for minimal soil disturbance, three natural filtration ponds for water making its way to Squaw Creek, and new wetlands and meadow land areas at a ratio of 2-to-1 to those displaced by course construction.

The course is home to bald eagles, red-winged blackbirds, a variety of small wildlife, and an array of wildflowers, including lupine, yarrow, aster, columbine and Indian paintbrush.

An aquifer below the course supplies drinking water. The aquifer’s presence led to the original pact between the resort and its Olympic Valley neighbors.

"The measures appear to have paid off. Last December, the course was designated as a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary by the Audubon Society of New York State in conjunction with the United States Golf Association.