Drought plagues East Coast

"I just got back from New Jersey. You've got to feel for the superintendents down there. It's been so dry, even the weeds are brown." — Scott Cybulski, superintendent, Falmouth (Maine) CC

By PETER BLAIS

Scott Cybulski's sympathy for his fellow superintendents is well placed, according to Stan Zontek, agronomist for the United States Golf Association Green Section's Mid-Atlantic region.

During his travels throughout his five-state area — Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and West Virginia — Zontek has witnessed the effects of what some are calling the worst drought in the past 100 years.

"It's a notch above awful," Zontek said. "Today [Aug. 5], the state of Maryland imposed mandatory water restrictions. Watering of fairways is only allowed with syringe irrigation with a 80-percent reduction in water usage required. Greens and tees are limited to the minimum necessary.

"Delaware is on voluntary restrictions and will probably go into mandatory water restrictions by noon on Friday [Aug. 6] north of Wilmington.

"Pennsylvania went to mandatory water restrictions last week. They allow watering of tees and greens only and syringing to a maximum of 15 minutes a day to heat-sensitive grasses, which are defined as bentgrass and poa annua fairways. Any irrigation of sodded or seeded areas can only occur from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m., which isn't going to help for sodding or seeding.

"In Maryland, they don't even allow that. No agricultural irrigation is allowed at all.

"West Virginia was just designated a drought emergency by the President. Virginia has voluntary restrictions, although in the far western corner of the state it's wet.

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Golf Communities files for bankruptcy

By PETER BLAIS

ORLANDO, Fla. — Golf Communities of America, a publicly held Orlando-based course owner and operator that recently filed for bankruptcy court protection, hopes to submit a reorganization plan by early fall, according to R. Scott Shuker, an attorney representing GCA.

GCA and its 21 subsidiaries operate five active courses, have three courses in planning or under construction and own property in Florida, Texas, Utah and North Carolina. Among GCA's courses are Cutter Sound Golf & Yacht Club in Palm City, Fla.; Hillcrest Country Club (under con-
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In addition to brown grass, the drought has led most courses to restrict golf carts to cart paths and/or roughs. But despite the inconveniences, Zontek said golfers have been extremely understanding of the superintendents' dilemma. “You walk out in the sun and your yard is all burned up, it doesn’t take a superior intellect to understand the problem,” Zontek said.

According to Zontek, it’s too early to tell what long-term problems could arise from the prolonged dry spell. “Cool-season grasses have a very efficient dormancy cycle under drought stress,” he said. “The grass may look white, but if you get rainfall for recovery, it will pop back just fine. High-traffic areas are the problem.

“The second major effect will be on trees. The ground is powder dry four feet down, and most tree roots are in the top three feet. They are losing leaves now. I’m seeing trees literally wilting. That’s sayonara. Arborists say it takes up to five years to see the effects of a drought on trees. So that’s where the greatest long-term effect is likely to be.

“The bent and poa annua greens are taking it on the chin. Anthracnose is out there. There definitely will be some re-seeding this fall.”

Zontek said no courses have closed due to the drought. A course north of Philadelphia has turned to the tank trucks that supply water to swimming pools to water its greens, he said.

As of mid-August, there was no end in sight to the dry conditions. The tropical storms that spawned rain-laden, late-summer and early-fall hurricanes along the East Coast had yet to materialize.

“They had predicted nine hurricanes this year. So far there have been zero,” Zontek said.

The drought will change how superintendents prepare their courses for winter.

“How can you aerate fairways, fertilize, overseed, or do your normal fall renovation without water?” Zontek said. “It’s putting a lot of fall programs on hold. There was a course outside Baltimore that was going to convert from ryegrass to bentgrass fairways this year. That’s not going to be a big question mark now. It’s making everyone pause and re-evaluate.”

New Jersey has been the hardest hit state in the USGA’s Northeast Region, according to Director David Oatis, who oversees New England, New York and New Jersey. Recently enacted statewide water restrictions state “Golf course greens and tees may be watered with sprinklers or other mechanical means from 9 p.m. to midnight and 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. Syringing is permitted for no more than 10 minutes for each green between noon and 3 p.m.”

“I’ve heard about some major problems, but haven’t really seen any catastrophes out there,” said Oatis, noting that much of the damage occurred around July 4 when low humidity and high temperatures made it impossible to put down water fast enough to save some turf. “Courses have lost some shallow-rooted, weaker grasses. And there has been some pythium reported. But greens seem to be holding up. There hasn’t been any widespread damage, yet.”

A potential problem down the road could be gray leaf spot, Oatis said. “It’s probably been too dry to germinate. But there could be a nasty outbreak coming. Gray leaf spot could just kill off the perennial ryegrass.”

The superintendents are irate. You can have an impounded pond that doesn’t rely on city water, streams or wells, and it doesn’t matter.”

— Stan Zontek
USGA Green Section

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