Drought conditions on East Coast to persist into spring

By A. OVERBECK

The warm and dry winter along the entire East Coast has helped courses increase play and has allowed superintendents to tackle more off-season tasks. However, as dry weather has persisted into March, courses from Maine to Georgia are facing the possibility of entering spring under challenging drought conditions.

Some states have already declared drought emergencies and put restrictions into place and many more states could follow suit. The long-term forecast from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) calls for a slight improvement but predicts water shortages will continue to persist through May. Among the more staggering drought indicators are:

• The Northeast experienced the second driest September through February in the past 107 years.
• NOAA said the drought, which started in some areas in 1998, is now classified as hydrological because of low ground water, lake and well levels. These droughts typically last longer to end.
• Drought emergencies have already been declared in New Jersey and in 26 counties in Pennsylvania (See related story on page 8). At press time, New Hampshire and Maryland were close to declaring emergencies.

“This winter drought is not unprecedented, but it is unusual for such a large area to share a drought of this magnitude,” said

Organic golf activists score major victory

By A. OVERBECK

BROOKLYN, N.Y.—The Long Island Neighborhood Network (LINN) has won a major victory in its battle to make all new golf courses organic. A four-judge Appellate Division panel here unanimously reversed a lower court decision Feb. 25 and ordered the Town of Stony Point to comply with SEQRA (State Environmental Quality Review Act) by completing a full environmental impact statement (EIS) before continuing work on its $18 million Rick Jacobson-designed golf course.

The decision builds on a similar lower court victory and settlement in Suffolk County in 1998 (GCN June 1999) that forced the county to commit to making its two new 18-hole courses in Yaphank completely organic. The recent decision, however, could set a precedent on a larger scale since it would apply to Nassau and Suffolk counties in addition to Brookline, Queens, Staten Island, Orange,

Gotham, First Union Real Estate to merge

By DEREK RICE

NEW YORK — On the same day National Golf Properties announced its planned merger with American Golf Corp., First Union Real Estate Equity and Mortgage Investments and Gotham Partners LP also agreed to merge. The resulting entity, Gotham Golf Corp., will be a publicly traded company.

Representatives from both companies declined to speak on the record for this story because a registration statement had not yet been filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. There is no formal target date for completion of the merger, although if it has not been completed by August 31, payouts to First Union shareholders increase.

The deal has been in the works for some time now, and has been through many proposed incarnations

Toro, GE Capital create financial offering

By ANDREW OVERBECK

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — The Toro Co. has partnered with GE Capital Vandor Financial Services to provide a branded, single-source financing solution for golf courses and municipalities.

The move not only consolidates the company's previous financing options but it also gives Toro access to a financing arm that is larger than Textron Financial Services and John Deere Credit. Textron Financial Services and John Deere Credit have managed assets of $8.1 billion and $13 billion, respectively, and GE Capital has served assets of nearly $20 billion.

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East Coast drought already forcing water restrictions

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NOAA drought specialist Douglas LeCompte. "Our historical data shows that you need to have some improvement going from a winter drought into spring and summer. But even if we get a couple good storms we will have some lingering impacts as we go into summer because wells and reservoirs are so far below normal. We are still in drought territory."

LeCompte added that storms in early February and late March had little impact on water supplies.

DEVELOPING A DRAUGHT PLAN

Superintendents, especially those who got hit by the drought of 1999, are already preparing to plan for potential drought conditions, water restrictions and increased disease pressure.

The first step in dealing with dry weather is to develop a drought plan.

"After checking your irrigation system to eliminate leaks and ensure efficiency, you start off by watering less," said Brian Vinchesi, design engineer for Pepperell, Mass.-based Irrigation Consulting and president of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants. "After that you stop watering the rough, then you cut out the fairways except for landing areas, and then fairways altogether. If things get worse you have to decide whether you stop irrigating tees, but you can't stop watering greens."

Another key to efficiency is to increase the control over the irrigation system, said Vinchesi. Superintendent Tim O'Neill at the Country Club of Darien (Conn.) did just that this winter. "We went from a system that had 230 heads to one that has 1,000 heads," O'Neill said. "With individual control I can put the water exactly where I want to put it."

"Such control could come in helpful if watering restrictions are put in place this summer, he added.

However, some courses are flat out running low on water resources. Superintendent Billy Lewis at Carolina National in Bolivia, N.C., pulls water from lakes that are five feet below normal. This fall his course spent $50,000 to buy water from the county in order to overseed $20,000 worth of seed. Conditions have not improved this winter.

AGRONOMIC CONCERNS

According to David Oatis, director of the United States Golf Association Green Section's Northeast region office, if drought continues into the summer, superintendents will experience increased disease pressure.

"Any stress-related disease such as summer patch, anthracnose, dollar spot, localized dry spot and fairy ring become problems in a dry year," said Oatis.

Lewis has already had outbreaks of dollar spot. "We have spent a lot more money this year controlling dollar spot due to the warmer temperatures and dry conditions," he said.

Drought conditions will be compounded, said Oatis, by damage caused by higher levels of winter play that many courses experienced.

"We have set a record for winter play this year," he said. "And there is a direct relationship between heavy winter play and more summer stress and disease problems."

Chris Carson, superintendent at Echo Lake Country Club in Westfield, N.J., stuck to his guns this winter and kept members playing on temporary greens.

"With the winter weather the damage is not as bad, but we feel closing in winter is better for the course in the summer," he said. "We just opened some back up this week, but will hold off on opening all of them for a while longer."

With water restrictions and disease pressure looming, superintendents agree that the best approach is to reduce stress on the turf. Aeration and verticutting will be out and stockpiling up on wetting agents, surfactants and plant growth regulators will be in. The key will be having the water resources to properly apply those products.

"The money you were spending on fungicides will now go toward labor for hand watering and wetting agents," said Bill Wall, superintendent at Dauphin Highlands Golf Club in Harrisburg, Pa.

COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY

Just as local governments are starting to grease the skids by promoting water conservation habits, superintendents are taking a proactive approach to communicate the potential impact of drought conditions to members, green committees and golfers.

"I am formulating a plan right now," said Carson, whose course is hosting the USGA Girls Junior National Championship in July. "We have a green committee meeting next week and I am going to lay it out step by step about what the possibilities and probabilities are and what the potential loss is. I also need to talk about investing in wetting agents, explain the use of plant growth regulators and discuss raising the height of cut."

While timely rains could make a big difference and help courses get through the dry spell, it is important to explain that this year could be different.

"When the water is down you have to make sacrifices. This is not the year to plant ornamentals and annual flowers. It is not the right time to do a lot of renovation work," said Wall. "We also need to educate golfers that lean and mean is better. We sell green, but the game is better played on a firm, fast and dry surface."

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