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Consistent demand needed to bring drought-resistant turf to market

BY ANDREW OVERBECK

CORVALLIS, Ore. — As drought gripped much of the nation this summer, many superintendents demanded to know what progress turf breeders were making in the development of drought-resistant turfgrass varieties.

In fact, in a Golf Course News poll in July, 66 percent of respondents said turfgrass that offered drought tolerance would provide the most benefit (see graph at right).

According to turf breeders, work on drought-resistant varieties is ongoing, but bringing them to market will require consistent demand.

“When I started in this business 20 years ago, I thought we would be up against the wall and that drought resistance would be the major issue,” said Seed Research of Oregon’s Leah Brillman. “But drought-resistant varieties will never make it in the marketplace if courses don’t make it a priority in their selection process and value the trait in the long-term.”

RESEARCH IS ONGOING

That said, Brillman is working on several drought-resistant turfgrasses.

Water restrictions seen as long-term problem

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historical usage and in June it was changed to 80 percent of our allotment, which is a huge difference,“ said Bertels.

Some Pennsylvania counties forced courses to reduce historical usage by 30 percent.

Superintendent and green industry groups played a big part in shaping regulations in both states.

“Eighty percent of allotment was a very good solution from everyone’s perspective,” said Carson.

“We pressed hard to have an equitable distribution of water and it has worked. In August after continued heat and drought, they changed the regulations again but decided to crack down on homeowners watering lawns. They left golf courses alone. “Restrictions helped reduce water use,” he continued, “but they were not so draconian that we lost a lot of turf because of them.”

Wall thought restrictions in Pennsylvania were reasonable as well.

“Here government worked,” he said. “We went in there and discussed it with state officials and it was not all one-sided. They collected input from everyone and came up with a reasonable plan.”

Working out reasonable restrictions, however, was only half the battle.

“It stayed dry through August and the people who got hurt were the ones with reduced resources,” said Wall. “When you have to reduce an already reduced supply by 30 percent, it is a problem. We did a lot of hand-watering to increase efficiencies and tackle hot spots.”

Even courses in parts of the country that didn’t have state mandated water restrictions had problems when they flat out ran low on water.

“Our water is captured from runoff from the course and the surrounding development and once its gone I have to buy potable water,” said Tony Bertels, superintendent at Prairie Highlands Golf Course in Olathe, Kan. “That gets pretty expensive. We purchased 60 days of water, which costs $1,000 a day. It’s a budget-breaker.”

Billy Lewis, superintendent at Carolina National Golf Club in Bolivia, N.C., had to buy nearly $60,000 in water last fall to complete oversedging after his lakes dropped five feet. This summer, a series of low-pressure systems hung just off the coast, bringing timely rains that held his water buying to just under $10,000.

LONG-TERM WATER SUPPLY CONCERNS

As courses move into winter and fall rains moderate drought conditions, Carson cautions that courses should remain vigilant about addressing ways to save and conserve water.

“As soon as the rains come, people forget about these issues,” he said. “That is a mistake. There needs to be a unified program and protocol to make sure that restrictions make sense. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection is very concerned about existing use and future use of water because we are such a densely populated state.”

Wall said he now assumes that each year is going to be a drought. “I have incorporated more wetting agents into my budget,” Wall said. “I am also modifying our irrigation system with 50 more quick couplers so every point of the golf course is within reach of 150 feet of hose.”

Both Bertels and Lewis are looking to get more water from other sources.

“Since there is not a lot of water close to the surface here, we are considering working with the adjacent airport to build a five acre lake to augment our water supply,” said Bertels. “They have a big watershed area we could use and gravity feed it into our lakes.”

Lewis is banking on effluent water to fill his water needs down the road.

“We have 800 lots sold, so we should pick up quite a bit from effluent and that should alleviate the problem,” he said.

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