Necessity is the mother of invention

I first met superintendent John Farley in 1998, when he was working at Fairways and Bluewater Resort and Golf Club on the island of Boracay in the Philippines. Being on an island in a developing country made certain resources scarce (including water), so Farley had to use his creativity to make things work.

He recycled anything that would decompose to make his own compost, carved out sections of PVC with poured concrete bottoms that were wrapped in seamless wicker. He also showed me a prototype of his hand-held spot herbicide applicator he called “Clappy the Weed Killer.”

Farley, who now works at Teal Bend Golf Club in Sacramento, Calif. (see story page 9), was just one of the first many innovative superintendents I would meet.

In the past month’s issue of Golf Course News, showcases several superintendents who have used their inventive smarts to stay ahead of the game. Frank Dobie, superintendent at The Sharon Club in Sharon Center, Ohio, uses the latest in plumbing technology to take a look underground and find blocked drain tiles in his greens. While you can rent a “See Snake” from your local plumber, Dobie plunked down eight large and bought one for his club. He said the unit has saved the club time and money and has improved the quality of its greens – which he added also leads to increased job security (see story page 9).

Job security was one of the things superintendent Paul White’s mind when he took over the superintendent’s position at Old Mill Golf Club in Portage, Michigan.

After looking at the fungicide budget and noticing no improvement in the quality of the greens, he decided that he needed to discover something that would help strengthen his turfgrass. “The place was going downhill,” White recalled (see story page 9). White decided to see what biostimulants could do to improve turf quality. He set up 45 different 1,000-square-foot test plots in a fairway to test various products. While the tests are still ongoing, he now uses an enzyme-based product called Vital Reactions on all of his greens and has experienced better turf conditions with using fewer chemicals.

Former superintendent David Mihalides has taken his devotion to his invention one step further. Mihalides, who invented his underground hose reel in 1999 while a superintendent at Boulder Hills Golf and Country Club in Rhode Island, now works for Reelcraft Industries.

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A superintendent once commented to me that his club's response to achieving certification was, "If it's a lot of work for just another plaque on the wall, forget it. People play golf here for the condition of the golf course and not how many birds are on the property. Concentrate your efforts on golf course conditioning." Perhaps this is a little harsh, but it is certainly to the point.

There are a few areas of the program that have affected the golfing environment. One of the first practices the ACSP advised was the "reduced maintenance" approach. The main idea was to eliminate aircut on a golf course by taking out-of-play areas and naturalizing them. The initial thought of reducing maintenance and cutting labor costs seemed to catch on quickly. Many superintendents embraced this idea and proceeded to naturalize. Now many golf courses have reverted back to maintaining these areas. There are many different reasons for this reversion, but the primary reason was speed of play. When natural areas begin to restrict the playing area, players spend more time looking for lost golf balls instead of playing golf.

What about promoting wildlife on the golf course? This has been an area of dispute for many courses. The problem stems from promoting wildlife species that cause destruction of property. Some of these destructive species include beavers, muskrats, elk, deer, voles, martens, prairie dogs and geese. For example, the prairie dog (aka ground squirrel) is a tremendous pest throughout the Western United States. Their burrowing creates numerous problems throughout the golf course from bunkers to rough areas. Many golf courses have eradicated this species each year to minimize damage. The word "eradication" doesn't sit very well with the ACSP. Another dubious promise is that the ACSP will save courses money. If that was true, everyone would jump on the bandwagon. According to Audubon, you can save money by reducing chemical, water and energy use. No professor in turf school, or anyone I've worked for the last 30 years, told me I had to join the ACSP to make those decisions. Many superintendents have practiced Integrated Plant/Pest Management programs through the ACSP, courses can see dramatic chemical use reductions. Less chemical use means money saved on product purchased, as well as on time and labor for preparation, application and clean-up, among other things.

According to our annual "Managed Lands Survey of Golf Courses," at least 75 percent of ACSP members have recorded a reduction in pesticides costs. Less pesticide use also reduces potential for spills and contamination, and avoids associated cleanup costs, regulatory fines and increased insurance premiums.

What about water use? The ACSP helps you save money by eliminating non-targeted watering (i.e., sidewalks, pathways and ponds), ensuring well-maintained irrigation systems, incorporating evapotranspiration and weather data into irrigation schedules, etc. Our "Managed Lands Survey" indicates that 89 percent of ACSP golf courses have improved their irrigation systems or the ways water is applied and as a result, a majority of those courses report a direct reduction in water costs. Reduced irrigation use also leads to reduced electricity costs.

What about maintenance costs? Our "Managed Lands Survey" reveals that ACSP member courses increased the non-mown areas of their course by an average of 22 acres per course without sacrificing play—resulting in reduced mowing time, gas and equipment maintenance.

There are other intangible business benefits the entire industry should consider. For instance, policy-makers and regulators like to see successful voluntary environmental action in an industry. However, if the 13 percent ACSP membership rate is a reflection of the golf industry's level of environmental commitment, it's easy to see why many agencies, environmental activists and communities still speak of golf courses negatively. Having 50 percent of all courses take action and see positive environmental results through efforts like the ACSP can help to reduce the potential for increased regulation, and less regularly require regulatory compliance costs.

The golf industry has the opportunity to become an environmental leader among industries, driving good environmental stewardship and recognizing the financial savings that come as a result. Audubon International's education, certification, and stewardship programs can serve as fuel for that engine. It's time for golf course owners, managers, superintendents, and others in the industry to throw away the outdated argument of "environment versus economy" and learn what other industries have learned—good environmental stewardship is just good business.

Kevin A. Fletcher is director of golf course management at the Country Club of the Rockies in Edwards, Colo.

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course management. As a result, it does not add a great deal of labor or time. It's time for the golf industry to replicate other industry successes and seize the opportunities to reduce water and resource use, reduce maintenance costs, eliminate waste, and lower energy bills—all in the name of good environmental stewardship. With 75 percent of superintendents expecting either no increase or reduced operating budgets in the coming year (according to a Dec. 2002 Golf Course News Poll), reducing costs is more relevant than ever. The ACSP can help courses realize these savings.

Let's explore some of these environmental savings opportunities. By focusing on cultural practices and Integrated Pest Management programs through the ACSP, courses can see dramatic chemical use reductions. Less chemical use means money saved on product purchased, as well as on time and labor for preparation, application and clean-up, among other things.

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