Drought could threaten Colorado courses in '03

BY ANDREW OVERBECK

DENVER, Colo. — Much of Colorado and the Mountain West remains in the grip of an extreme drought that some scientists say is the worst in 350 years.

Drought began hammering the area last summer, causing widespread water restrictions and has shown no sign of letting up this winter. While storms finally hit Denver in February, the area received no measurable precipitation in December and January.

Four City of Denver courses, which usually stay open throughout the winter, have closed due to the dry conditions. Other courses across the region that usually stay open have had to restrict golf cars to roughs and paths or ban them altogether. Courses on the Front Range that traditionally close because of snow cover stayed open longer than ever this year because winter weather did not arrive.

"JUST HOPING TO BE IN BUSINESS'

While the warmer and drier than normal winter is damaging now, many superintendents are increasingly concerned about the impending water shortages and restrictions that could severely impact the upcoming golf season.

Since many courses get water from irrigation canals that run out of the mountains, concern is justified. According to recent reports, snowpack is at about 75 percent of normal and would need to be 125 percent to 150 percent of normal in order to fully replenish the depleted reservoirs.

"One hundred percent of our water comes from irrigation ditches," said Lee Terry, superintendent at Pinehurst Country Club in Denver, "Right now it is running 20 to 30 percent of normal and last year it was dry by the fifth of June.

"I have enough water in my lakes to irrigate the golf course twice, but that's it. I have to wait until they turn the ditches back on or make a special arrangement to get them turned on early," he added. "We are just hoping to be in business at the end of the year."

Wellshire Golf Course is the only 18-hole course run by the City of Denver that is still open.

"We have a well and a 15-acre lake that collects stormwater from streets and a surrounding housing development," said superintendent Gregg Blew. "With our that I would be shut down just like all the other city courses. They had to close because they use potable water and were restricted to irrigating tees and greens."

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Restrictions have been in place since July when Denver Water mandated a 30 percent reduction and subsequently restricted irrigation to greens and tees only on Sept. 1. The other city courses will remain closed until March 1 when the city will re-evaluate the drought situation. Blew is preparing for the worst.

"If we don't get a good snow," he said, "we will be starting with greens and tees only in the spring. It will take a lot of moisture to heal those cracks in the fairways. Some of them are so wide you can lose a ball in them.

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

Terry and other area superintendents have already formulated plans to deal with the continuing drought.

"Our problems started back in 2000 when we had to use water rights to pull water out of reservoirs that were miles away in order to irrigate the course in the summertime," said Terry. "We bought more water rights three years ago, got well drilling permits and put in a new irrigation system so that we can reduce consumption. We also eliminated ryegrass overseeding in favor of bluegrass because it is more drought-resistant. And we improved our cultural practices. That is about all we can do."

Terry said the course is in the process of drilling another well, and he expects to have more water available than he did last year as long as the state does not revoke the course's water rights.

Other courses are busily working to piece together more reliable and consistent sources of water.

Dan Hawkins, superintendent at The Ridge at Castle Pines in Littleton, is hopeful that the development's effluent system will be up and running by spring. The course, which will eventually be surrounded by 2,900 homes, was originally designed to use effluent.

"We have been on wells and city water," he said. "Water in this area is becoming a scarce resource. You need to have another means of water versus wells or canal water from the mountains. We are supposed to go on effluent in May because there are enough homes now where we can get good flow."

Dennis Lyon, who oversees the City of Aurora's seven courses, is drilling more wells, converting courses to effluent water and buying more water rights to ensure a steady irrigation source this season.

"The drought in Aurora has been very bad. We have had three inches of snow this winter," he said. "Three of our courses, however, are on reclaimed waste water and we don't use potable water on any of them. The others are tied into the water storage system, so we are in a holding pattern on those."

One of them is having a well drilled, another will be on reclaimed waste by May 1 and another is working on improving water rights. It is a tough situation but I think we will be in good shape this season."

One situation is so dire, however, that corralling the necessary water will require renovation work. Deer Creek Golf Club in Littleton was forced to close Dec. 16 because of it had insufficient water storage. The owners are considering a redesign of the four-year-old Scott Miller-designed layout to improve both irrigation efficiency and water storage capacity.

According to former Deer Creek superintendent Scott Phelps, the course got slammed earlier than most last year.

"We were irrigating greens and tees in May," he said. "By the middle of July we were completely dead, there was nothing left."

Phelps has since moved to Arrowhead Golf Club in Littleton, but is not any more optimistic about the upcoming season.

"All of us are going to be faced with same [drought] situation this summer," he said. "It is hard to say if any place in the state is better off than any other."