While expected to deliver carpet-like fairways, superintendents aren't over-relying on insecticide use to get the job done

It's been a given for years that golfers demand greens to be at a premium and in consistent condition throughout the playing months. Today, however, many golfers expect fairways to be in as good a state as the greens. In short, the bar has been raised on fairway maintenance.

But superintendents aren't pulling out the stops when it comes to insect control on fairways because of the added pressure they face to keep fairways in top shape. While they're expected to deliver carpet-like fairways, superintendents are not relying on increased use of insecticides to get the job done.

Rob Kloska, superintendent of Jupiter Island Club in Hobe Sound, Fla., realizes the increased importance placed on fairway maintenance, but he still adheres to an integrated pest management program.

"I don't believe in broad-spectrum spraying of insecticides," says Kloska, whose course's main insect enemies are mole crickets and grubs. "I'd rather find the problems, see the problems and treat the problems."

Mike Melichar, customer agronomist for Dow AgroSciences turf and ornamental business, says there's been a movement to get away from broadcast applications of insecticides on fairways, especially for surface-feeding insects. "Superintendents are looking for softer, safer and less mobile chemistries," he adds.

Mark the spot

At Hidden River Golf & Casting Club, located in woodsy upper Michigan, the first-rate bentgrass fairways are finely manicured. But since the course features the trout-laden Maple River, certified superintendent Steve Sump is careful in his approach when treating for insects.

"Preventative" is not a word muttered from Sump's lips when he talks about fairway insect control. Neither is "blanket application," which makes him cringe. "Spot treatment" and "curative approach" are the words Sump prefers regarding fairway insecticide control.

"When your course experiences insect outbreaks, you map where they are so that in the coming years you have an idea where they'll occur," says Sump, who treats ants, black turfgrass ataenius and cutworms with a granular insecticide. "When I see a problem, I spot treat it. I also try to use the lowest active ingredient insecticide available."

Don Dodson, superintendent of Lakeview Resort in Morgantown, W.Va., says he's cut back on the use of fairway insecticides because of environmental concerns, his course's low maintenance budget and golfer courtesy.

Dodson's approach is also curative. He measures the severity of an outbreak before determining whether to act on it. While he may see insect-inflicted damage, he won't react to the problem unless golfers notice the damage and comment on it.

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Dodson, Kloska and Sump believe more superintendents are spraying less insecticides on fairways. Even superintendents at high-end clubs aren’t spraying wall-to-wall insecticides, they say. If they’re practicing preventative programs, they’re doing so only on areas with a history of insect outbreaks.

“We’re trying to be more responsible because, No. 1, it’s the right thing to do,” Kloska says. “And No. 2, if we continue to be careless with the insecticides we use, they’re going to keep taking them away from us. We can’t afford that.”

The “they” Kloska refers to are EPA officials and other environmentally minded lawmakers. Kloska is not saying those people are wrong; he’s stressing that superintendents use the tools available to them more wisely. If they don’t — and if their tools are revoked — superintendents will pay the price, literally.

“It will end up costing us more,” Kloska says of a potential scenario where new and safer insecticides will be more expensive because they will have to go through more testing to be registered. “The cost will be passed on to us, which is justified,” Kloska notes.

Economically speaking
Kloska’s philosophy is “spot treatment with everything.” While his is an environmental stance, it’s also economic.

“We owe it to the people we work for to spend money properly and to follow labels,” Kloska says. “Why do I want to treat an area that doesn’t need to be treated? That’s just costing me money.”

Kloska says fipronil is his best weapon against mole crickets. It’s also economical, he notes, citing the products long-lasting effect. “It’s $315 per acre, but for the control you get the price is phenomenal,” he adds.

Dave Shetlar, professor of entomology at The Ohio State University, agrees that most superintendents have made a conscious effort to reduce insecticide use on fairways. “On the other hand, we have the tools that allow superintendents to do that,” he notes.

“‘There are products that are extremely effective on a range of organisms,’ Shetlar says, noting insecticides such as imidacloprid and halofenozide feature multiple activities. “Superintendents have the luxury of reducing the number of applications while achieving the same level of control.”

Tips for control
Fairway insect outbreaks will keep Dodson on his toes. The past few years, he’s noticed an onslaught of May and June green beetles. Also, he recently noticed the fairways were crawling with earthworms. “It’s always something different,” Dodson says.

Over the years, Dodson has learned the tricks of the trade to keep up with the bugs. To attract problem insects to the fairway surface, he recommends superintendents mix “imol” — a mixture of iron and molasses — into their spraying tanks. Insects are attracted to the sugary substance, says Dodson, who learned the tip from Gary Grandstaff, superintendent of the Pete Dye GC in Bridgeport, W. Va.

There are other cultural practices superintendents can follow to control fairway insects. Sump advises superintendents to control thatch content on fairways. Too much thatch provides a haven for insects, Sump notes. Grubs can live just below the thatch layer and chew on turf roots.

Also, irrigation often parallels insect control, Sump points out. If fairway turf is kept dry, the chance of an insect outbreak decreases.

Shetlar says turf with increased root depth is an obvious detriment to insect damage. He recommends deep-core aeration and reduced compaction to assist root growth. “Fertility at the right times of the year — late in the season and early in the season — will also stimulate root growth and assist in reducing grub damage,” he adds. •

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