For the past 16 years, the Florida GCSA has partnered with the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association (FFVA) to be the first stop on its annual spring tour. On the tour, federal and state regulators of southwest Florida’s agricultural and green industries visit Tim Hier’s Old Collier Golf Club in north Naples, as well as nurseries, sod farms, cattle ranches and more.

Thanks to tighter budgets, only 20 regulators made the trip this year. And whereas superintendents on hand usually mix and mingle with the regulators and answer questions on the tour, the trip around the course was cancelled this year due to heavy rain showers. Consequently, this year’s tour was reduced to a two-hour Q&A session centered on pesticide use and safety issues.

I gave the basic breakdown of average turf acreage in terms of greens, tees, fairways and roughs, while superintendents in the room explained their insect, weed and disease programs, the products they use and their turf treatments. Kyle Sweet, who runs The Sanctuary Golf Club on Sanibel Island, talked about his programs and products, which have to be approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Dept.

George McBath, a retired ornithologist who works with area courses to install nest boxes, told regulators he was skeptical of golf courses during his early years as an ecology instructor but after doing bird counts on golf courses he realized what great habitats they are.

He also explained how the large eastern bluebird population in the Naples area allowed the Fish and Wildlife folks to harvest young bluebirds to repopulate Everglades National Park, whose own bluebird population was declining from years of inbreeding. The new influx of birds from Naples now is restoring the native population.

One of the state regulators on the tour specifically mentioned getting “numerous” complaints about spray drift. Some of it was the typical reaction when an adjacent property homeowner sees the spray rig at work and assumes the worst.

Fortunately, the rain stopped toward the end of the tour, and the group was able to see Old Collier’s immaculate pesticide and fertilizer storage rooms and mix/load pad. But we regretted not having the chance to show them the modern course design — complete with wildlife corridors and natural areas. As they say, “Seeing is believing.”

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