2005 YEAR IN REVIEW

Bob Vavrek
USGA Senior Agronomist, North Central Region

At most courses across the upper Midwest, it was a quiet, peaceful season, with little, if any, heat stress to turf. Temperatures barely climbed into the upper 80's and then for only a day or two. At some courses the grass had nearly grown over the sprinklers due to the infrequent need to irrigate turf during the unusually mild weather.

On the other hand, providing consistent playing surfaces was very difficult this summer if you happened to be unlucky enough to have experienced significant winterkill. Scattered occurrences of injury to turf from ice and desiccation were extremely slow to heal over due to cool soil temperatures through early summer. Damage in fairways was still evident at many courses well into August, despite several attempts to overseed thin sites.

It should come as no surprise that fairway recovery was slowest in areas where concentrated cart traffic caused wear and compaction to the turf. Consequently, make every effort to divert cart traffic away from winterkill, with ropes and stakes if necessary, until the playing surfaces heal completely. Start this policy in spring and make no exceptions for outing and special events because immature plants have little tolerance to wear.

As usual, the performance of turf covers with respect to winterkill prevention was inconsistent during 2004. Every season a few more types of cover materials hit the market with the usual sales pitch…green up sooner/open sooner, increase revenues with early play, improve turf density during the spring, complete protection from desiccation and crown hydration and so on.

The bottom line has not changed very much over the years…covers are simply not the panacea for all the types of winter injury that can occur across the northern tier of states. Under certain conditions they can be beneficial and an excellent investment, under other conditions they have little, if any, impact on turf quality and survival. On occasion uncovered turf survives the winter better than turf under certain types of covers. When all is said and done, a moderately heavy application of sand topdressing applied uniformly over the greens still provides a fairly good level of protection from desiccation during an open winter.

The mild weather this summer was a blessing in many respects. Cold, exceptionally wet weather during spring limited root growth and most courses entered the summer with weak, shallow root systems. Greens scalped down to increase green speed have typically had the poorest root growth. Many courses are routinely mowing greens at or below 1/8" and you would be hard pressed to find many roots deeper than an inch under these conditions. Turf stress would have been severe if the summer had turned out to be hot and dry.

Dollar spot pressure was quite severe all season. Superintendents have commented often that fungicide treatment intervals needed to be shortened significantly due to the ideal weather for disease activity. Constant vigilance was necessary to prevent widespread outbreaks of dollar spot that seemed to explode overnight as fungicide barriers began to break down.

Take-all patch was observed at a number of courses during June. It was no surprise that bentgrass turf on new golf course was affected. However, a fair amount of Take-all was seen on old fairways.

Sod webworms damage to greens was seen on visits from early spring through summer, though the amount feeding injury was rarely severe enough to warrant an insecticide application. Ants, however, were particularly troublesome on greens, tees and fairways throughout the summer.

Weeds had little trouble competing with slowly growing turf during April and May. Clover was a persistent problem and once the weather finally warmed up into the 70's and 80's, a considerable amount of crabgrass germinated across bunker banks and other droughty areas of the course. Despite these concerns, the past season has been exceptionally kind to turfgrass at most courses.

Most superintendents believe that the gradual transition to cold temperatures during late fall provided ample time for the turf to harden off before winter. The condition of the turf as it entered December and January may well determine how well it survives the ice storms and thaw/freeze cycles that have occurred at two to three week intervals this winter. Some damage to *Poa annua* may already exist, with plenty of time for more winter stress to occur during February and early March. Mid to late winter is the time to sample turf from greens that have a history of winterkill to document injury and initiate plans to renovate damaged sites during spring if necessary.