

# THRU THE GREEN

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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## MISDIRECTED GOOD INTENTIONS CAN SPELL TROUBLE:

The greatest challenge ever to our careers, our industry, and our game is racing toward us with the speed and power of a bolt of lightning. That challenge is the concern for the environment. And these thoughts are directed toward representatives of every aspect of the golf industry - club leaders, superintendent, golf professionals, managers, architects, golf course builders, trades people, researchers, and players.

I take great pride in calling myself an optimist. I admire people who, when you ask them how things are going, answer with an emphatic "Good!" Perhaps it is this optimism that leads me to believe that the entire environmental issue (which many of you may see as a threat at this time), will actually benefit our game and industry in the long run.

However, I also believe that we are in for some very tough times at first. While optimism is wonderful, pessimism suggests that many of us will not be up to the challenge. Let me share my perception of the near future that is blended with optimism, pessimism and what I hope you will agree is a great deal of realism.

In the near future, the number and amount of pesticides available will decrease tremendously. No amount of lobbying will prevent this. Public perception, whether right or wrong, is growing that ALL pesticides are bad, and those who use them are harming the environment. Once this occurs, some superintendents will find the "tools" they have relied on so heavily in the past are no longer available.

Not all superintendents are good turf managers. There are those who are able to keep their courses in good condition because they can apply enough pesticides and spend enough money to compensate for a lack of turf management skills. There are also many who

actually cause more problems on their courses than they correct. Some apply chemicals as nonchalantly as they do water. Their "preventative program" includes applying products to protect against virtually every known turfgrass pathogen. Imagine what would happen to your health if your physician used this same logic.

Invariably, it is this superintendent who finds his greens suffering one crisis after another. His response is to apply even more chemicals

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## ARE YOU CHEMICALLY DEPENDENT?

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on a curative basis. This superintendent and his course are truly chemically dependent. When allowed to progress far enough, this vicious cycle of events often results in the failure of large area of turf and eventual replacement of the superintendent.

Because the science of our industry has not yet progressed to the point that we can completely eliminate pesticide use while meeting the demands of the player, even the best turf managers are likely to experience problems when pesticide restrictions are significantly increased. However, their course will fare much better than most and will serve as a clear indication of the value of a skilled superintendent. His stock will rise significantly. Those of you who fall into this category will gain from the demise of your less-skilled colleagues.

Soon a superintendent will not be able to apply pesticides based only his perception about when

they should be applied. The leadership of golf clubs will determine when and if applications can be made. Their decisions will be based upon reducing the club's liability to the extent possible. The risks of lawsuits will be given much higher priority than the superintendent's assessment of the risk from pythium and brown patch. The first reaction to reduce the club's legal exposure will very likely be to require all pesticide applications to be made when the club is closed. While this may seem a blessing at first, since more superintendents would love to see their courses closed one day each week, it is likely that such a restriction would actually backfire in terms of reducing pesticide use.

Superintendents would find themselves applying pesticides based strictly on the calendar rather than on actual need. If brown patch pops up on Wednesday, how many superintendents will be able to wait until the following Monday to treat? Since most feel they cannot, the natural reaction will be to treat every Monday to ensure problems do not arise during the mid-week.

In the not-to-distant future, the cost of applying pesticides will skyrocket. The products will cost more due to testing expenses, labeling can't on page 3

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requirements, and lawsuits against the manufacturers. Pesticides and the rinsate will require special handling and storage containers. Insurance akin to malpractice carried by physicians will be required by superintendents. To compensate, clubs will be forced either to increase the maintenance budget or accept a reduction in the overall appearance of the course. Realistically, most clubs will choose a combination of these two options.

The application of fewer pesticides on golf courses will result in a course that is less immaculate than the average golfer has come to expect. While the perceived quality of most courses will suffer, those courses managed by a superintendent who has relied too heavily on pesticides will deteriorate the most. Without the equalizer of unlimited pesticide availability, the varying abilities of turf managers will be highly visible to all.

You may not accept all of these predictions. However, if you accept even one, you must also accept that our industry and the game of golf will be strongly affected. Many will choose to ignore the inevitable until it is too late. You assume relations, the researchers will develop grasses that don't need pesticides, and the chemical companies will develop chemicals that are so safe they will have Rachel Carson's picture on the label. You will not be up to the challenge and you will not survive.

If you are a superintendent, you might blame your demise on the USGA and the Stimpmeter. The architect can blame the golf course builder who did not follow his plans. The builder can blame the superintendent who can't properly "grow in" the course. The USGA agronomist can blame the architect who made the course too difficult to maintain. What a party we can have. Ironically, the only thing that may keep us all from cutting each other's throats will be shared dislike of the organizations we consider environmental radicals, along with their lawyers.

Or...

We can each take step right now to prepare ourselves. Let's become "survivalists" not by stockpiling guns and ammunition but by reducing our exposure to the threat.

Immediate options are available to each branch of our industry.

**To the Superintendent:** Learn to be a better turf manager. Emphasize your skills in water management, disease identifications, soil cultivation, and fertilization. Review the principles you learned in Turfgrass 101 and simplify your programs as much as possible. A strong, healthy turf is unquestionably your best defense. You have a history of being the greatest and boldest experimenters with new products. It is time to begin to experiment more with doing less. Use every skill you have to reduce your chemical needs.

**To players and club officials:** Realize that you will be affected by these changes in the industry. Understand that absolute perfection on the course is no longer a realistic goal. Greater emphasis should be given to playing quality and the agronomic needs of the turf. Quit judging a superintendent's worth based on the speed of the greens. Realize that nature cares very little about your tournament schedule and that maintenance practices must be given higher priority than they have in the past. Consistent management is vital. Develop long-range plans and quit changing green chairmen every year.

**To the architect and golf course builder:** All those involved with the development of new courses must make major changes. Stop selecting grasses with total disregard of local climate. Just because a turf can be grown with enough pesticides and a big enough budget does not mean it should be. Stop cutting corners on green construction. Stop building greens in holes where air movement is non-existent. Pay greater attention to drainage throughout the property.

**To the researcher:** Give us facts. Prove that what we are presently doing is not harmful, if that is the case. However, of equal and even greater need in my eyes is the identification of what to expect and do under low or no pesticide use. And, of course, the continued development of superior turfgrasses is critical.

**To the golf professional:** Emphasize playing quality to the golfer. Remind players that golf is a game to be enjoyed, not an exercise in frustration or an opportunity to be critical. Emphasize the positive aspects of your course. With the help of a good pro, even the shortest nine-hole course with the smallest budget can give great enjoyment to the player.

**To my colleagues in the USGA:** Let us avoid

the temptation to offer quick but short-lived fixes to problems. While solid agronomic advice may not be glamorous or offer instant improvement, it is what is needed most of all. We are perhaps in the best position to gather the facts from other groups and disseminate them to the entire golf industry.

**To the leadership of the USGA:** I hope our organization will use its tremendous influence to educate golfers and make them more receptive to changes that are coming. Equally important will be the continued funding of turfgrass research.

**To those who are not a part of golf:** Realize that golf is an industry that does care for the environment. Golf courses have tremendous positive effects on both the land and the people who use it. This should not be a case of you versus us. We will stand a better chance of achieving common goals if we work together.

As I said, I am an optimist. I see the significant challenges we face as an opportunity to better our industry, our game and ourselves. Let's make the power of the lightning bolt work for us instead of against us.

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