

Tips from the USGA:

1999 in the Southwest Region

by Pat Gross, Southwest Director

The past year was very productive and rewarding for most golf courses in the Southwest. As we leave 1999 behind, it is always a good idea to see where we have been and hopefully learn from our collective experiences. The following are a few highlights from the Southwest Region in 1999.

Labor shortage – With the economy booming, many courses found it difficult to fill vacant positions on the maintenance staff. This left many courses short-handed and limited their ability to complete improvement projects. Golf courses seemed to be competing with construction contractors for entry level laborers, and golf courses often lost out to the higher paying construction companies. One superintendent remarked that he couldn't even find a person to operate a weed-eater for \$9.00/hour. Some courses have compensated with more part-time employees, but many courses are still struggling to keep a well-trained staff.

Mild weather – After the heavy rains of El Nino, La Nina brought less rainfall and milder temperatures throughout the spring and summer. Because the weather was so good, play was up at most courses compared to the previous year. The mild weather was also a benefit to superintendents, with fewer pest problems and healthier grass. Many superintendents pressed their luck with lower putting green mowing heights further into the summer. There seemed to be many happy golfers this summer as a result of the faster greens. During a mild year, you can get away with it, but each year is different.

Redgum lerp psyllid – A small insect pest called the redgum lerp psyllid caused extensive damage to several species of eucalyptus trees throughout California. The larvae of the psyllid produce a crystallized honeydew structure called a "lerp", which serves as a protective cover for the larvae and complicates control efforts. Heavy infestations caused severe leaf drop on many trees. According to entomologists at the University of California, repeated defoliation can weaken the tree and increase susceptibility to wood-boring pests such as the eucalyptus longhorn borer. According to John Kabashima with the University of California Cooperative Extension, the redgum lerp psyllid has been a common pest in Australia for over 100 years and rarely kills trees. Some courses are implementing aggressive control programs while others are weathering the storm. In the meantime, entomologists at the University of California are actively pursuing and testing various biological controls for the psyllid, a project that may take two to three years.

Overseeding – Courses in Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Palm

Springs had a successful overseeding season. While overseeding establishment seemed to go quite well, the main challenge for the desert courses was the control of *Poa annua*. Various products and programs were tested including standard products such as ethofumesate (*Prograss*) and newer products such as prodiamine (*Barricade*) and the fungicide fenarimol (*Rubigan*). Overseeding was also a hot topic for courses in the inland valleys of southern California. Cold temperatures in December caused the complete dormancy of bermudagrass and kikuyugrass. Courses that decided to overseed looked like heroes in the spring and early summer, and courses that decided to forego overseeding received a lot of criticism until the warm season grasses resumed active growth in April and May. But, with such mild temperatures, the overseeded perennial ryegrass persisted throughout the summer in many locations and limited the recovery of bermudagrass. The question of overseeding will continue to spark debate throughout the Southwest. Most locations are able to provide excellent turf conditions for nine months of the year. The main question for course owners and members is what three months are you willing to accept less than perfect conditions? (December through February, or July through September?)

New grasses – A number of new courses have planted some of the improved creeping bentgrass and hybrid bermudagrass cultivars of greens. Penn A-4 creeping bentgrass appears to be the most popular variety with extremely fine texture and ability to handle very low cutting heights. Courses with the new Penn A-series and G-series grasses are still getting comfortable with the required maintenance practices. According to the superintendents I have talked to, the most important aspects of maintenance include 1) thatch control, 2) nitrogen fertility rate, and 3) proper mowing practices. The regional test greens sponsored by GCSAA, the USGA, and NTEP are also performing well. The Southwest is very fortunate to have four of the sixteen test greens. (The SCGA Members Course, Murrietta, CA; Crystal Springs Golf Course, Burlingame, CA; Fox Hollow at Lakewood, Lakewood, CO; and the Country Club of Green Valley, Green Valley, AZ) If you have not had a chance to visit one of the sites, make it a point to stop in and see the grasses this year. What makes this project unique is that the grasses are maintained under actual playing conditions with traffic so that superintendents and club officials can get a realistic view of how each grass performs in their area.

What's ahead for 2000? So far, it looks to be a very dry year. Many courses are looking a little tired and salt-stressed due to the lack of rainfall. Let's hope Mother Nature gives us a few showers soon to freshen everything up and get us off to a good start in 2000. Happy New Year, and best wishes for a successful and productive year. ♣