

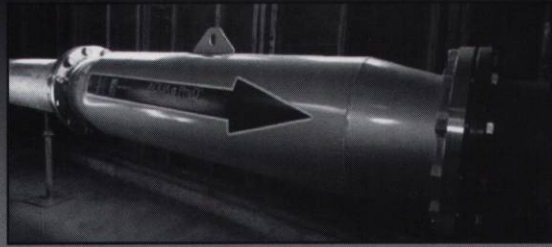
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## CAN YOU AFFORD TO FERTILIZE?

*By David Piper, CGCS*

There is no escaping the rapidly increasing expenses associated with operating a golf course. Rising oil prices have effected the cost of all petroleum based manufactured goods, raw materials such as ammonia, natural gas and sulfur have increased to staggering levels, and the weakening American dollar have significantly impacted the cost of imported goods. Some of these factors have also increased the price of fertilizer yet plant nutrition is vital to a successful management plan. Can our industry continue to afford to fertilize? Are Golf Course Superintendents being forced to jeopardize the basic fundamentals of plant health? Making good choices before deciding whether fertilizer is a necessity or luxury, could potentially smooth long term economic clumps in the turf.

Driving the rising fertilizer prices are simple supply and demand equations. The global population continues to prosper creating a hunger for a higher protein diets, China, India and several other countries continue to industrialize with a thirst for almost all raw materials. And corn continues to lead the race in the demand for ethanol based bio fuels. In addition to these variables, high natural gas prices have caused twenty five U.S. ammonia plants to close permanently since fiscal year 1999 creating the foundation for soaring fertilizer prices.

So how does this impact the Golf Course Superintendents attempting to balance the budget and please the golfer? Fertilizer is a necessity to feed the growing global population and without it people would starve. The fertilizer produced to grow corn, soy beans, and wheat is the same fertilizer produced to grow lawns, parks, and golf courses. It originates from the same pile. U.S. corn was trading for only \$2.00 a bushel in 2006 and has increased upward to \$6.50 a bushel. Our industry grows turf grass and there is no way to capture the higher fertilizer costs through crop yields. Fertilizer has become more expensive but eliminating it from a turf management program could be far more costly than the current price per bag.

Like many other businesses, a golf course relies on a certain clientele to insure consistent revenue. Without the golfer, there is no revenue. As the economy weakens, so does the discretionary income that is used for recreational activities. Golf courses generally have a certain value to the consumer based on course design, playing conditions and price. Once the playing conditions diminish, so does the value. Golf Course Superintendents are struggling to balance budgets and often asking whether fertility is worth the expense.

*(Continued on page 14)*



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## CAN YOU AFFORD TO FERTILIZE?

If the golf course were not fertilized, the impacts would be noticeable and severe. Traffic areas would not recover. Diseases such as, Rusts, Dollar Spot, Red Thread and others associated with low nitrogen fertility would become problematic. The reactive approach for treating diseases would pose an economic impact when considering the cost for fungicides and their application. Perhaps the worse case scenario would be the long term effects of this risk. Once you have lost business or even worse, your reputation, it is difficult to get it back. While the idea to save money by cutting corners may have good intentions, the efforts could quickly backfire with the perception of a less than desirable facility.

There are professional and effective methods for communicating and capturing returns under these adverse economic scenarios. Communication could be the one tool that proves most valuable. Making major adjustments or cuts without communicating them is not the correct approach. Monthly meetings, newsletters, monthly billings, scheduled walkthroughs are all opportunities to share information and invite positive feedback. It is not uncommon to adjust budgets throughout the season. These can be far less painful if properly communicated and would be less likely to generate an unpleasant phone call from an unhappy customer. Yellow grass or dead grass on the other hand will almost always generate a phone call.

Other ways to conserve when facing tight budget times is the use of the controlled release fertilizers. The initial cost may appear high but the cost average over several weeks is more economical. For example, fertilizer that is \$30 per bag and lasts 10 weeks has an average cost of \$3 per week. Whereas fertilizer that is \$20 per bag and lasts only 5 weeks has a weekly average cost of \$4 per week. There is also a labor savings as fewer applications are needed on an annual basis. Equally important is doing your homework and buying quality fertilizer. There is a difference between slow release and controlled release. Generally, the more control the better. Ask your supplier the questions and challenge them to help you assemble a fertility program. You should expect the same level of service and quality from your supplier that your customers expect of you.

There is no shortage of challenges facing the golf industry today. The cost of fuel, equipment and labor are continuing to soar. There are constructive methods for doing more with less. However, without a well orchestrated plan, proper management and a consistent long term approach, reducing or eliminating fertilizer could spell disaster. While all the soaring costs have raised several questions about whether you could afford to fertilize; A better question could be...could you afford not to?