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Using turf colorants instead of winter overseeding can help golf facilities provide better year-round playing conditions while consuming fewer resources. (USGA/Chris Keane)

TURF COLORS BENEFIT A CHANGING BUSINESS MODEL

Pinehurst Resort | Pinehurst, N.C.

Bob Farren, Director of Grounds and Golf Course Maintenance

Patrick O'Brien, USGA Agronomist

In parts of the southern U.S., where golf is played throughout the year, fairway overseeding is a common practice that is intended to enhance aesthetics and playing conditions through winter and into early spring. Unfortunately, establishing and maintaining overseeded turf is expensive, and there are serious consequences for turf health and playability during the rest of the year. These drawbacks may not be a significant concern for facilities that are focused primarily on golf during the overseeded months, but at a year-round golf facility like the Pinehurst Resort in Pinehurst, North Carolina, the negative impacts of overseeding were affecting the golf experience.

USGA Agronomist Patrick O'Brien has been consulting at Pinehurst for more than 30 years and saw

firsthand how overseeding impacted playing conditions. “The overseeding process itself created weeks of disruption in the fall, which should be prime golf season in Pinehurst, and damage to the underlying bermudagrass could be seen well into summer,” said O’Brien. “By the time they had the bermudagrass back in good shape, it was almost time to overseed again.”

This pattern repeated itself for decades, but changes in golfer demand created an increasing need for high-quality playing conditions throughout the year. The restoration of Pinehurst No. 2 in 2010–2011 provided an opportunity to break the overseeding cycle.

“The soft and inconsistent playing conditions that came with fairway overseeding were totally at odds with the goals of the restoration project,” said Bob Farren, Pinehurst’s director of grounds and golf course maintenance. “In addition, the single-row fairway irrigation and irregular turf perimeter meant that overseeding was not going to be practical on the restored golf course.”

After discussing the situation with O’Brien, Farren and the Pinehurst agronomy team attended one of the USGA’s annual Turf Colorant Workshops to learn more about using colorants as an alternative to overseeding.

“Using colorants instead of overseeding would allow us to deliver the look and playability that we wanted on the restored Pinehurst No. 2,” said Farren, “but it was going to be a tough sell because it was such a big change and there weren’t many courses using colorants at that time.”

“Patrick was instrumental in helping us explain to stakeholders that not only were we going to get the desired playability, we’d also save a considerable amount of resources that could be focused elsewhere on the golf course,” said Farren. “With the support of USGA Agronomists, we were able to get everyone on board with using colorants and the difference has been huge.”

Without the disruption of overseeding, fall playing conditions on Pinehurst No. 2 became some of the best of the entire year. Winter golf on the painted fairways is fast and firm, and the bermudagrass greens up earlier in spring and provides better playing conditions through summer. Using colorants instead of overseeding proved so successful on Pinehurst No. 2 that the switch was made on all the golf courses at the resort.

Today, Pinehurst offers better playing conditions throughout the year to match the year-round demand for golf. The resources once devoted to establishing, maintaining and recovering from overseeding have been saved or reallocated to other areas of the golf course maintenance operation.

“The USGA Course Consulting Service really helped us transform the business model at Pinehurst and they helped our agronomy team make a huge contribution to the success and sustainability of the resort,” said Farren.