



On The Road With The USGA—March 2008

By Bob Brame, regional director, Central Region

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Recent winter weather patterns throughout the lower portion of the North Central Region have been true to the season. Nonetheless, we've reached the point where golfers are beginning to think about a new season.

While the enthusiasm is a good thing, several weeks of inconsistency lie ahead. The cold nights and warming days often will yield a zone at the top of the soil that thaws during the day and then refreezes at night. Traffic on golf turf, and especially putting surfaces, during these late winter/early spring freeze-thaw cycles can result in turf damage. Roots held tightly in the lower zone remain frozen, and yet they are subject to movement or shifting near the soil surface relative to equipment and foot traffic. The resulting damage can slow the process of bringing the course to its full potential. A good, easy-to-apply, rule of thumb on greens, is tied to changing holes. Specifically, if a hole cannot be readily changed due to underlying frozen soil traffic should not be allowed. Exercise a little patience now and it will pay dividends as the new season unfolds.

Even after a complete thaw of the root zone that allows holes to be changed, soil temperatures will hold back active growth. Soil temperature directly impacts grass growth and the plant's ability to handle traffic. Trying to push growth with fertilizer applications when the soil temperature is low and growth has not yet resumed will not speed the turf's ability to handle traffic. In fact, when soil temperatures do increase, the potential growth surge from fertilizer applications that are made too early can compromise rooting and open the door to agronomic and playability concerns. Remember, weather conditions will have the final say when play can be safely allowed and when agronomic practices can be expanded.

While every course is unique, weather variations, agronomics, economics, and politics are a reality for everyone. An agronomically sound maintenance program

serves to guard quality and playability during harsh weather, which then helps support economics in the form of needed revenue. It's when politics fails to consider what is realistic within the existing maintenance package relative to the operating budget and weather conditions that a flawed direction is charted.

A big part of what the USGA Green Section does is a candid review of how agronomics, economics, and politics impact the golf course maintenance operations. As such, the value of subscribing to our Turf Advisory Service is elevated during tougher economic times. All of the courses in our database should have received a mailing about subscribing to a Turf Advisory Service visit this season. If your course did not receive such a mailing let us know.

Recognize that the golf course is the primary asset at most facilities, and there is simply too much at stake for anything less than a comprehensive audit of your operation by an unbiased Green Section agronomist.

Patience is the operative word over the next few weeks as weather conditions ebb and flow. Should specific questions arise that we can assist with don't hesitate to call or email. We're always available and looking forward to working with you.

Source: Bob Brame

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[Information on the USGA's Course Consulting Service](#)

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