

## New Year's Resolutions From A Budgetary Perspective

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Every year we are inundated with New Year's resolutions that encourage us to either change or continue how we complete a myriad of functions in our lives. Even last year, a January 2008 "New Year's Resolution for Golfers from a Maintenance Perspective" was proposed in this regional web page forum that remains appropriate this year.

However, in the past year the lagging economic indicator for the game of golf has caught up with other facets of our economy leading to very difficult times at golf courses ranging from the highest to the lowest budgets. With this in mind, this year's New Year's resolutions come from a different angle—out with the green



*A premixing tank and proportioner can allow for the use of lower cost, ag grade fertilizers on larger acreage areas.*

and in with the lean—as in methods to address your budget. The resolutions are directed at golf course superintendents, Green Committees, and any others involved in the business side of golf course maintenance. Above all, your players need to understand that they need to assist even more in fixing ball marks, replacing divots, raking bunkers properly, driving carts where they belong, and simply realizing that playing conditions can be enhanced as long as they are willing to "lean away from green"!

**1. I resolve to not frown at brown.** The current *USGA Green Section Record* (Jan-Feb. 2009) has "[The New Definition of Golf Course Conditioning](#)" written by Ron Whitten, senior editor of *Golf Digest*. The decision to focus on playing conditions, rather than green color can mean a massive savings on your budget if you are in

an area where water or electricity (or both) are high, and for every course that reduces fertilizers and other inputs as well as maintenance on other portions of the golf course. Read this article and then do not "frown at brown"!

**2. I resolve to look at different ways to replace equipment.** In the Sept./Oct. 2008 issue of the *Green Section Record* the article "[Fleeting Moments](#)" addresses the change that has occurred with capital allocations at golf courses and the growing trend to address costly equipment fleet replacement with a cash flow model. Take a close look at this idea as it could result in a substantial savings in funds for your operation.

**3. I resolve to take a very close look at "old school" fertilizer techniques.** There are numerous fertilizers on the market with no single type providing the one answer. However, at a time when budgets are being reduced dramatically just to survive (i.e. staff reductions) it also is important to look at other high cost portions of your operation. How much, what type, how frequent, and fluid versus granular fertilizer programs should be closely scrutinized as many report a simple switch to agriculture grade materials dissolved into a fluid application and combined with growth regulation produces significant savings on both fertilizer cost and equipment longevity.

**4. I resolve to increase "recycling" efforts for sand based areas.** Over the past few decades, golf courses all over the Pacific Northwest have had great success with fairway topdressing. With ½-¾" added annually, many courses have well more than six to seven inches of sand accumulated over very poor soils, yet producing firm winter playing surfaces. In that same time, a standard recommendation has been given that when the depth of the sand reaches four inches, or beyond the depth of a fairway aeration unit, the amount of annual sand can be reduced with at least two open tine aerations accounting for "topdressings" as the sand cores are a great source of sand when they dry and are dragged back into the upper profile. This same program can be conducted on the tees. Due to the amount of sand used on greens there is generally nothing wrong with the same idea on the greens. This is especially true in areas where sand costs have simply gotten

completely out-of-hand. For example, Hawaii golf courses are now being charged as much as \$150/ton for sand imported from the Mainland or foreign countries. Every golf course has a valuable and expensive resource already found under your greens, approaches, and tees. The amount of organic that will be placed back in the holes is minimal, and during a time of severe budgetary concerns this is a simple idea that may be worthy of consideration at many golf courses.

**5. I resolve to reduce frequencies if staff size is reduced.** In most cases, golf courses with extreme budgetary issues are cutting staff sizes in the Northwest Region, thus players need to understand that the frequency at which their golf course will be maintained cannot be the same. While the use of larger triplex mowers on greens, approaches, and tees will not compromise these areas and will allow for regular mowing with a smaller staff size, the larger acreage fairways and roughs are the greatest concern. Fairway mowing frequency can be improved with growth regulation, lower fertilizer rates, and controlled irrigation, however how can mowing frequency in the roughs be modified without making playing conditions too difficult? In addition to reducing fertilizer levels as much as possible and keeping fertilizer intended for the fairways off the rough perimeters, one simple way to address the largest acreage area is to lower the mowing heights to 1 to 1.5" to keep the roughs playable with a once per week mowing. In the Northwest Region a mowing height higher than this often leads to actual rough playing conditions in excess of 2.5" when a weekly mowing schedule is used. Thus, the lower mowing is advised for reduced rough mowing frequencies that are needed due to the reduced staff size. And finally, look at ways to reduce overall mowing requirements with naturalized rough areas or 4" mowing heights in areas well out of play.

**6. I resolve to minimize bunker raking with more spot raking.** Bunkers are hazards that need to be avoided or a penalty will be extracted for the player. Maintaining bunkers at a level that costs as much or more than green maintenance makes no sense at a time when budgets are being stretched, thus many are reportedly greatly reducing raking frequency to 1 to 2 times per week with spot raking the remainder of the time. Players must do a better job of raking their own footprints

to make this reduced raking frequency work effectively. Reports from golf courses have been positive as most complaints with regular raking are the bunkers are "too soft" resulting in fried-egg lies. Less frequent raking generally will not lead to this problem.

**7. I resolve to match maintenance practices to the amount of play each area receives.**

While every type of golf course is not viewing reduced play levels, there are some (resort destination, for example) that are experiencing a considerable reduction in overall play. Since holes need to be changed based on the amount of traffic, hole changing frequency can be reduced if play also reduces. Also, fertilizer use generally is completed to grow turf well enough to recover from traffic and foot wear. Less traffic = less fertilizer requirements = less frequent sand topdressing = reduced overall material costs. In addition, fertilizer levels on lesser used forward and back tees do not need to be as high as the regularly used tees, and aeration of these tees is not as needed as those tees that receive regular traffic. Finally, in some cases, one worker can do the work of three with a triplex mower, cup changer, and hand rake attached to the mower if your staff size has been decreased significantly. Several resort golf courses with less play have reported very good results with these simple practices that maximize labor while minimizing transport time.

**8. I resolve to not compromise long range programs on greens.** While there are many areas of a golf course maintenance program that can be modified for a year or over a far longer time frame, any changes to basic programs completed on the greens should be carefully considered as layers of organic or excess organic material will severely affect putting green quality on every type of putting surface. Also, slightly higher mowing heights will result in a healthier turf resulting in less needed inputs, thus fast green speeds are not a good idea at a time when your budget may be stretched to the limit.

**9. I resolve to communicate to our players about all of the budgetary issues that may affect the golf course maintenance operation.** While not every golf course can use email to their advantage, this simple method of communication can be very effective for those golf courses with regular players. In some cases (mid-winter or

warmer summer months) daily or weekly email blasts, along with one or two photos, can be an effective tool for players to understand their impact on the golf course or what Mother Nature is providing for the golf course. In this "I want to know now" society that we live in, do not overlook the power of the Internet in your regular communication efforts.

**10. I resolve to use the USGA Green Section agronomists to assist on my golf course.**

The previous Northwest Region Web site update provided a short list of reasons why your USGA agronomist is especially suited to assist your golf course in a time of budgetary concern. While it would seem counterintuitive to pay the cost of a half or full day TAS visit, the exact opposite is true. With a focus on producing quality growing and playing conditions **with your budget in mind**, your USGA agronomist will easily save the cost of the visit and more when the written recommendations are followed. Call or email your regional agronomist to learn about the substantial savings for early payment this year, along with selecting the desired time of year for the visit.

The previous 10 resolutions could each be expanded into a complete article with some or all of these suggestions applicable to your golf course maintenance operation. It is hoped that each will be considered for your operation this year as we move toward a renewed U.S. economy in 2009 and beyond. Now that would be the best resolution of all!

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

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