

The future of irrigation



The recent dry weather and the apparent trend towards drier conditions in the UK make adequate irrigation provision more important than ever. Indeed it's the unpredictability of the weather which makes irrigation planning increasingly more difficult.

The inevitable result of the drier conditions is that water is being recognised as an increasingly valuable resource.

For greenkeepers there could be some very serious implications, restrictions on using the potable water supply have already been seen, and in the longer term the cost of mains supplied water could go up significantly.

The greenkeeping professional needs to consider long term irrigation planning. This involves investigating alternative sources of water such as boreholes. If the alternative use of water from rivers or streams is envisaged it will only be allowed on the basis that all the course's irrigation water is taken from the river during the winter and stored in a

reservoir. In order to know the reservoir capacity, greenkeepers will have to know how to plan and calculate water use and water budgeting, both financial and quantitative, will become a standard course management task.

Effluent water is another potential source as yet undeveloped in the UK

If lakes and reservoirs are being used for irrigation purposes the water in them will have to be maintained and long term solutions such as water aeration will form part of the essential process of irrigation water quality management.

Once a suitable and tenable water source is secured the next stage is to optimise the use of this water. This can only be achieved by having a well designed, well installed, well operated and well maintained system. All of these factors are interdependent and are key to effective irrigation.

While many greenkeepers will not have the opportunity to start with a new system those who are looking for replacement or exten-

sion must involve themselves and the other relevant people at the club in a thorough evaluation of what they want, and how to get it.

All too often decisions over golf course irrigation are made based around the contract price with little consideration of the longer term economics. Golf clubs must look for, and should expect, to buy not just an irrigation system, but an all round package of products and, perhaps more importantly, services. Long term support from the installer and his suppliers is key to a successful irrigation system. Investment in the right system will go a long way to offsetting the problems we are currently seeing, but time needs to be taken in selecting that system. Make sure you have enough technical and commercial information to allow an informed view to be created, price is important, but it is not the sole criteria upon which to make a decision about something as complex as a bespoke irrigation system. There is a wealth of experience and expertise in the specialised golf course irrigation companies and advantage of this must be taken.

Control systems, sprinklers and pipes are examples of areas where technology has moved on a long way from the early days. Inaccurate control systems are no longer acceptable, nor are pipe systems which allow significant amounts of water to be lost through joints.

For those not in a position to replace an existing system, correct maintenance and operation need to be the priority.

Poorly maintained systems cost

more to run and waste water and, as with most things, the breakdown is sure to occur at the most inconvenient time. Pro-active and regular maintenance should be the norm.

When it comes to operation there is much to do in regards to effective watering scheduling. Current control systems allow a high level of flexibility, in not only the amount of water to apply, but also in how it is applied. As an example, splitting the applications up into smaller amounts can ensure that water is not lost through runoff. Combinations of different schedules linked to other turf management programmes can make best use of available water. More consideration of creating a sward with better drought resistance will allow a more consistent irrigation regime.


We will see an increase in the use of products such as wetting agents and soil moisture retention compounds all aimed at optimising water use, but all with a degree of additional cost.

Greenkeeper training with specific regards to irrigation provision needs to be accelerated to the necessary levels.

We must remember that in the future water will be a more valued resource, we within the golf course industry must take responsibility for optimising water use for commercial reasons, and because quite simply, without it there be no courses to manage.

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Research surprises

The Golf Research Group has published a new report based on a telephone survey of every golf course in the UK. One of the big surprises was that 34% of them were proprietary – golf in Britain is not as dominated by private member courses as people thought.

Searches of company accounts show that 76% of the new built courses continue to be in financial danger (two years ago 88% of them were in jeopardy).

What's happening to cause this gradual improvement? In part some courses are managing to trade themselves out of trouble, average turnover at the new

courses rose a healthy 31% to £776,000. In part the weaklings are being bought by strong hands. Sale of golf properties were at a record level last year, 42 courses sold. The total spent on these purchases was around £80 million.

Certainly this type of money being put into golf is a major sign of investor confidence in the industry. On a more sombre note it should be remembered that these new courses are going for 40p in the pound on their original development cost. Projecting this up, of the £2.5 billion spent on golf development in the 1990s, 60% is likely to end up being lost.