Eric Green, Course Manager at Woodcote Park Golf Club in Surrey - a part parkland, part downland course, founded in 1912 - spoke to me about the affects that Sutton and East Surrey's drought order is having on their course.

"These are a critical few months," said Eric. "I've never seen our course and other local courses looking so bad."

Unable to use mains water to irrigate their greens, the greenkeepers at Woodcote Park have had to make some serious changes. Considering building a borehole and having had MJ Abbotts map out a reservoir, the club have had, like Walton Heath, to resort to using "grey" or "brown" water. Pains Hill at Oxted, is an old water treatment plant, that is providing free water to all golf clubs in the area, as long as they organise their own transport. "It costs £9,500 to hire a lorry and then there's the hiring of lorry drivers," said Eric. "Myself and my First Assistant will be taking heavy goods vehicles driving tests in the near future, as a precaution for next year," continued Eric. Oxted is about half an hours drive from the course and then, of course, there's the time it takes to fill up and empty the tanker. Four runs need to be made each day to transport the 8,000 gallons needed on a daily basis. "The plant closes at the weekend, so we have to store the water up in preparation," said Eric.

As well as tankers, the club have installed water butts around the Club House and staff accommodation, and more recently next to their 17 Century barn. "We have collected 1200 gallons of water from the butts alone," commented Eric. "Water has been drained from a swimming pool onsite, at one of the houses, to use in the sprayers, " continued Eric. The upsetting thing for Eric is that passers-by see the club using sprayers and immediately assume that they are floating the drought order, when in actual fact, they are having to make a lot of changes to ensure they don't get fined.

"Being on a chalk down means that the course is easily affected by a lack of water," said Eric. "I've started to stock up on grass seed -

Is desalination the answer?

Desalination is a process that removes dissolved minerals (including, but not limited to, salt) from seawater, brackish water, or treated wastewater.

In the event of extreme drought, the ability to supply water through desalination is an important, non-rainfall option.

Of the more than 7,500 desalination plants in operation worldwide, 60% are located in the Middle East. The world's largest plant in Saudi Arabia produces 128 MGD of desalted water.

In contrast, 12% of the world's capacity is produced in the Americas, with most of the plants located in the Caribbean and Florida. To date, only a limited number of desalination plants have been built primarily because the cost of desalination is generally higher than the costs of other water supply alternatives available (eg water transfers and groundwater pumping).

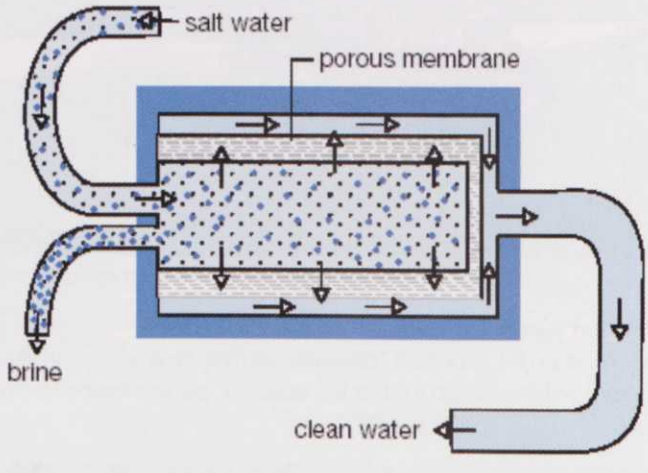
However, as drought conditions occur and concern over water availability increases, desalination projects are being proposed.

A £200m desalination plant was to be built in London, it would've been the first of its size in Britain and could have rivalled many in the Middle East. It could have provided water for the 900,000 people expected to move to the capital within 25 years, and be a back-up in case of emergency.

London's water supply is fragile and with an ever-growing population, Thames Water are concerned that unless a desalination plant is built, re-growth will be threatened.

Even if a drought only occurs every 20 years, this could lead to standpipes and water rationing. Mayor, Ken Livingstone has decided to block the plant, but Thames Water are appealing against his decision.

So it seems there are steps that can be taken, to try to prevent drought becoming an increasing problem. We must ensure that everyone understands what an important and precious resource water is, and make sure that our golf clubs and greenkeepers are well prepared for dry summers.



Desalination. Copyright Sydney Water