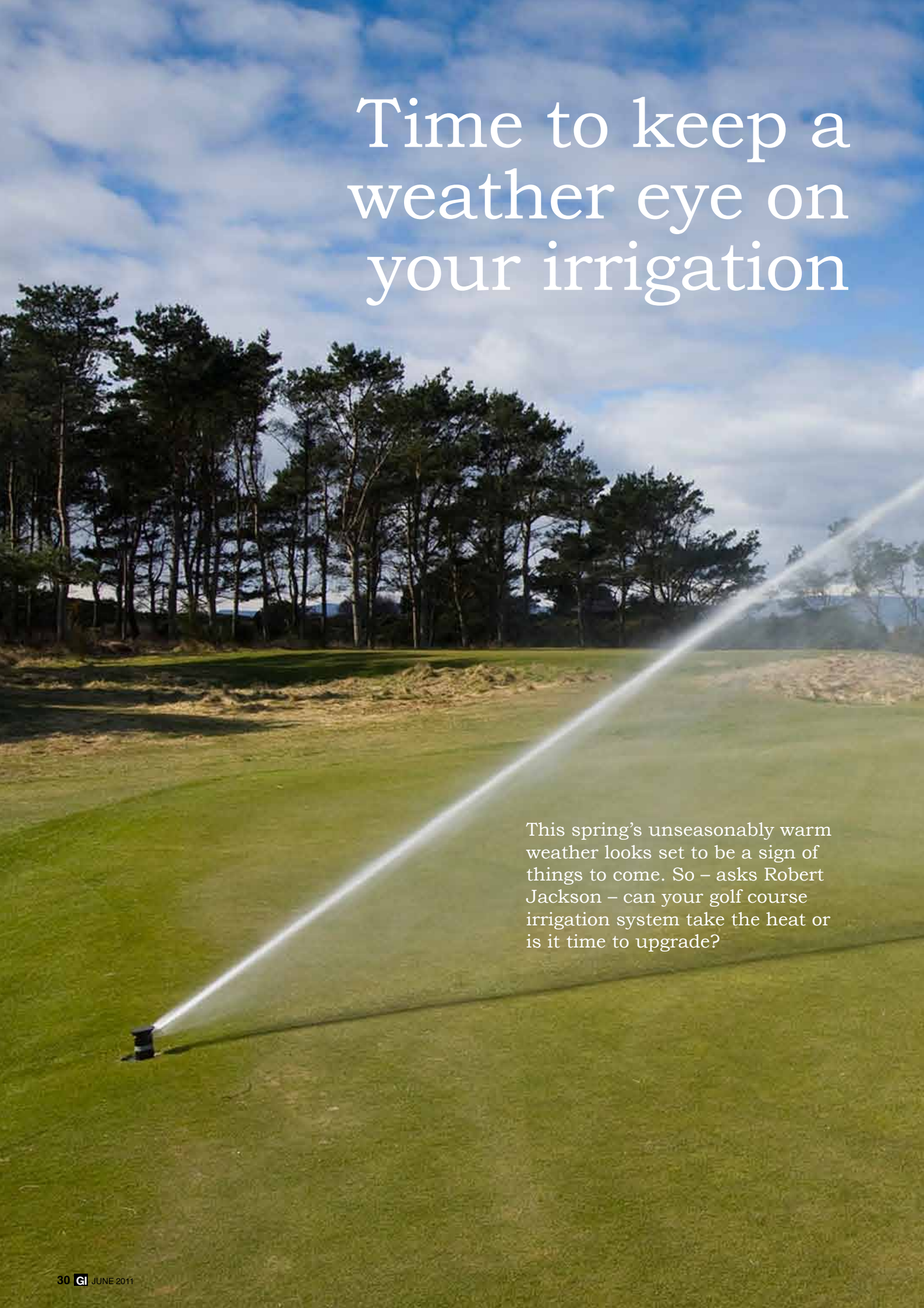
Time to keep a weather eye on your irrigation



This spring's unseasonably warm weather looks set to be a sign of things to come. So – asks Robert Jackson – can your golf course irrigation system take the heat or is it time to upgrade?

The unseasonably hot and dry spring weather has taken golf clubs across the UK by surprise in recent weeks, putting many an ageing and/or failing irrigation system to the test as a result.

If you're one of the clubs that have limped through the last couple of summers with an inadequate system, it's time to stop burying your head in the sand-bunker: either invest in a proper retrofit and remedial work, or budget for an all-new system.

Both are daunting steps in these economically difficult times, but are far better than having your existing system kick the bucket in the height of summer!

Let's look at your options…

Retrofit and remedial work

Did you know that remedial work can improve an existing system's efficiency by around 20%? By repairing or renovating, customers can make significant savings on ongoing operating costs as well as save on the expense of a new installation – something that makes perfect financial sense in these tough times.

If the wholesale replacement of your existing system just isn't feasible, then it is possible to phase in a new system over time – though you will, of course, be limited by the pipe network you've already got.

For example: you could replace your mains and cabling in the first year; replace your pump system and tank the second year; and then, depending on your budget, put in a greens, tees and fairways system in the third year.

By carrying out the first two phases, you are free to 'bolt-on' greens, tees and fairways cover as and when you can, which offers a more cost-effective solution.

Sprinkler nozzles are also subject to wear, so something as simple as adequate maintenance and periodic replacement can bring about a dramatic improvement in the overall efficiency of your system.

Because they need to be replaced every few years, manufacturers are constantly updating and improving their design and function, which means new nozzles will work at the very best flow and pressure whereas older nozzles will always become less uniform with age.

Remarkably, simply by renewing sprinkler nozzles, you can increase the efficiency of your system by up to 10% at the right pressure and flow.

With nozzles costing on average just £15 per head, this can be a highly cost-effective way of improving your system and is a job that can be carried out by the greenkeeping team.

Invest in an all-new system

Effective irrigation is crucial to successful course maintenance, and hence the majority of clubs have a contingency for this or are saving for a new system.

But many clubs persevere with serious problems, calling out the service engineers time and again, accruing unnecessary labour costs as well as causing turf damage during hot, dry spells, until it becomes a real headache.

Before you reach breaking point, it is prudent to weigh up the costs of calling out the engineers and growing annual service bills against budgeting for a new system.

More often than not, budgeting for new costs less in the long-term compared to throwing good money after bad in the short-term.

If a new system is called for, beware the pitfalls of buying cheap. Cheaper, lower-quality products have a shorter lifespan – which is not a good thing for something being installed underground!

What's more, leading companies invest a great deal of time and money designing and manufacturing products to perform to the most efficient and advanced standards, so a cheaper system will be less efficient. If it's cheap, it's cheap for a reason!

Probably the greatest mistake a club can make is to fork out for a new system that then leaves no room for expansion.

So if you decide to invest in a greens system, it is vital you consider there and then whether you will want to expand this into, say, a tees system in the future.

By discussing your present and future needs with a consultant/contractor this can be designed into your system, making it 'future-proof'.

Think about it: if you select a system that is simply designed to irrigate one green at a time then it is specified and costed accordingly.

So if you decide in a few years time that you want to add tees and fairways, the system will not have been designed to cope with this extra requirement.

You will then face the unpleasant prospect of having to upgrade or replace the mains infrastructure to cope with the additional flows and pressures.

Toro has been involved in the replacement of several systems that have been installed for less than 15 years, requiring clubs to make another major investment to give them the system they originally wanted. Proper long-term planning is, therefore, vital. A good system will last between 30 and 50 years if properly maintained and serviced, and should be flexible enough to adapt to the changing needs of your club.

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Act now

Course Managers are beginning to see a trend in weather patterns, and I think it's safe to say that this early hot, dry spell is a sign of things to come this summer.

Perhaps it's even given you a sneak preview of the kinds of problems you might face in the height of summer.

So if your irrigation system will struggle when things really hot up, act now to keep your course looking good and in perfect playing condition.

about the author

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