

Reflections on an Aberrant Autumn

A warm, excessively dry fall saw many area superintendents irrigating in November and wondering what might be next.

by Cathy Ralston

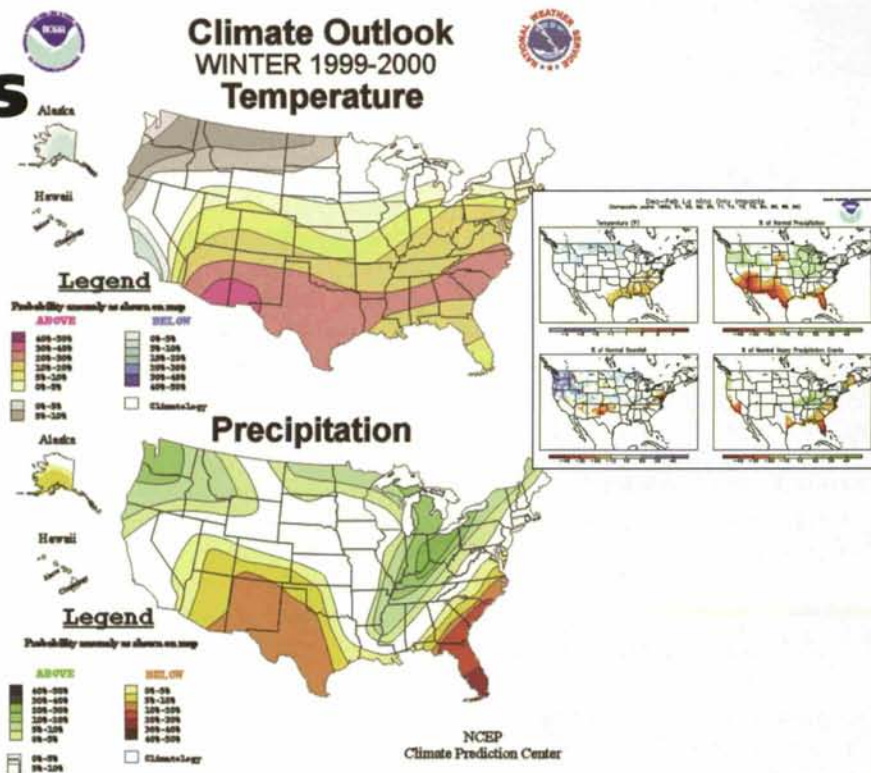
"Can you believe this weather?"


In October and November, we in the Chicago area could not help but greet each other thus. Many, like me, felt incredulous and giddy, cherishing the reprieve from autumn's standard fare: steel-gray skies, chill rains, early invasions of Arctic air. Golf course superintendents, meanwhile, were alternately amazed and dismayed, delighted and disgusted, bemused and baffled with one of the strangest fall seasons ever documented.

The statistics speak volumes. Statewide, November was the third driest November recorded since 1895. The July through November period was the fifth driest ever. In the Chicago area, November 1999 set a new record for percentage of possible sunlight and was completely snow-free. Temperatures teased us, reaching into the 60s and 70s on more than 30 occasions.


The weather not only lured mothers and tots to the playgrounds, but also saw droves of

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golfers descending upon area golf courses. As a result, superintendents faced the prospect of an extended season—deja vu of 1998, but with a twist: a significant rainfall deficit.

Said Jim McNair, Orchard Valley G.C., "We had September weather, so we did September work."

Indeed. And Jim wasn't alone in that sentiment, judging by the comments peppering the MAGCS message board in early November (see related article, page 11) and conversations with several other superintendents.

"We just officially closed on Sunday, December 5," noted Rick Reed, Arboretum G.C. "We had shut our water system down the first week in November, but we came close to turning it back on. Instead, we did some watering with a 300-gallon tank on tees and greens.

"Rains typically help the turf heal after aerifying—no chance for that this year," Rick said. "As far as snow mold spraying, we usually do that before Thanksgiving. This year, the window of opportunity is closing pretty quickly."

Commented Dan Dinelli, North Shore C.C., "Many people scheduled to blow out and winterize their irrigation systems at times they are accustomed to doing so. Some pushed back the date, others followed the plan. Among those who followed the plan, in about two weeks many recharged their irrigation systems to begin watering again—which is what we ended up doing here."

On the other hand, the weather was a boon to certain types of projects. "The warm, dry
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Illinois Climate Network (ICN) October 1999 Monthly Summary for St. Charles			
DAY	MAX AIR TEMP OF	TOTAL PRECIP IN	TOTAL EVAP IN
1	59.6	0.00	0.11
2	52.2	0.00	0.06
3	44.8	0.55	0.01
4	54.5	0.05	0.09
5	63.8	0.00	0.13
6	60.7	0.00	0.12
7	72.3	0.00	0.13
8	65.5	0.00	0.04
9	66.7	0.00	0.04
10	76.7	0.00	0.12
11	69.3	0.00	0.13
12	75.3	0.00	0.12
13	64.2	0.05	0.03
14	59.8	0.01	0.11
15	80.3	0.00	0.13
16	67.4	0.09	0.03
17	51.3	0.01	0.06
18	52.2	0.01	0.07
19	58.6	0.01	0.09
20	51.0	0.00	0.08
21	67.8	0.00	0.10
22	57.5	0.00	0.06
23	47.6	0.01	0.07
24	50.9	0.00	0.09
25	65.0	0.00	0.10
26	60.4	0.00	0.09
27	62.1	0.00	0.09
28	79.8	0.00	0.12
29	77.3	0.02	0.09
30	75.0	0.15	0.09
31	69.4	0.00	0.10
TOT		0.96	2.70
AVG	63.2		0.09
MAX	80.3		
Total Heating Degree Days: 447.4 Total Cooling Degree Days: 4.0 Total Hours of Wind > 8 mph: 310			

Illinois Climate Network (ICN) November 1999 Monthly Summary for St. Charles			
DAY	MAX AIR TEMP OF	TOTAL PRECIP IN	TOTAL EVAP IN
1	72.1	0.01	0.05
2	45.0	0.00	0.07
3	46.3	0.00	0.07
4	63.8	0.00	0.09
5	64.2	0.00	0.08
6	55.2	0.00	0.08
7	57.7	0.00	0.08
8	73.5	0.00	0.09
9	73.1	0.00	0.09
10	66.6	0.01	0.08
11	46.9	0.03	0.03
12	59.2	0.01	0.06
13	70.3	0.00	0.08
14	57.8	0.01	0.07
15	50.2	0.00	0.06
16	45.9	0.00	0.06
17	48.3	0.00	0.06
18	70.4	0.00	0.08
19	55.9	0.05	0.03
20	45.0	0.01	0.02
21	50.6	0.02	0.04
22	60.5	0.02	0.06
23	61.3	0.38	0.02
24	44.7	0.00	0.04
25	46.3	0.00	0.05
26	46.1	0.02	0.03
27	46.4	0.01	0.05
28	43.4	0.00	0.05
29	36.6	0.00	0.05
30	38.7	0.00	0.05
TOT		0.58	1.77
AVG	54.7		
MAX	73.5		
Total Heating Degree Days: 673.6 Total Cooling Degree Days: 0.0 Total Hours of Wind > 8 mph: 298			

Water and Atmospheric Monitoring Program Networks. (1999).
WARM Program Office, Illinois State Water Survey, 2204 Griffith Drive, Champaign, IL 61820.

La Niña Should Influence Winter Weather

How are long-range predictions measuring up to our winter reality?

In late October, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issued its winter forecast for the U.S. The La Niña phenomenon figured prominently in NOAA's forecast. A NOAA press release said, "La Niña will alter the strength and pattern of the Pacific jet stream over North America to give us a warm and dry winter in the southern half of the nation, but more snow and rain to the Pacific Northwest and Great Lakes. We expect considerable month-to-month variation in temperature, rainfall and storminess in the central, northern and eastern states, which means days of warmer-than-normal temperatures followed by bouts of bitter cold." Specifically, the Midwest should expect near-to-above-normal temperatures from north to south, and above-normal precipitation for the entire region.



The Glen View Club's Jeff Leuzinger was among Chicago-area superintendents who delayed blowing out their irrigation systems. "We usually use our irrigation system until the end of October," Jeff noted. "This season, we did not winterize until well past Thanksgiving!"

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fall was great for earthmoving projects. The dryness was also good for fall leaf cleanup. Blowing leaves and mulching was efficient, being so dry. And cool weather disease pressure was very low with little moisture to grow fungal pathogens," Dan said.

The Lake County Forest Preserve courses typically lay off seasonal employees the first week of November. "This year, we kept people through the end of November, which affected our budget," said Tom Morgansen. "But revenues are way up—once we got through July, we had a very good fall."

All other factors being equal, Tom said, "I would rather have it too dry than too wet, as long as you can get water to where it's needed. Our roughs didn't grow as usual, but that saved on cutting time."

Autumn's 'fall'out—a cruel spring?

As of December 7, we were in "a climatological drought, with less than 60% of normal precipitation over a three-month period," noted Bob Scott, a meteorologist with the Illinois State Water Survey (ISWS). "August through November were all sub-average precipitation months." Warm temperatures exacerbated the situation by enhancing evaporation.

More weather events like the soaking rain that fell December 4-5 could help alleviate the situation. "The ground isn't frozen yet, so any rain we get now will percolate down," Bob commented. "But there is so little moisture in the soil, the amount of total precipitation we would need to go into a normal spring is pretty high."

Added Bob, "We probably never go into the spring with enough water to nurture a crop, and any drought that you start in the fall puts you further behind. However, December has been wet so far and we probably will see a large rebound in precipitation and soil moisture next month."

The Glen View Club underwent renovations this fall—GolfVisions, a local golf construction firm, remodeled 85 large bunkers, built a new green complex and a new tee complex. "Hand-watering was a routine task during construction to try to keep up with the needs of sod and seedlings," said Jeff.

Photos courtesy of Jeff Leuzinger





"Conditions this fall were absolutely phenomenal for construction, especially for remodeling an established golf course," said GolfVisions' Tom Jauch, project manager for the Glen View Club renovation. "We were able to do a nice job with feature construction and minimize construction damage to the course."

The bottom line, according to the water resource experts: expect this fall to have some impact on next spring's conditions. At this time, however, it remains unclear whether the repercussions will be mild or severe.


Joel Johnson, president of Nels Johnson Tree Experts, hopes that advice dispensed this fall will prevent any widespread losses. "We encouraged people to soak trees, evergreens and shrubs to bring up the moisture in the soil," Joel explained. "A lot of trees withstand dry periods, even drought, and come back. I don't feel we're in a dire position yet. We might see some effects, sure,

but probably subtle ones—like more deadwood or dieback, and new growth next year could be less than this year."

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of this record-breaking autumn, superintendents are getting ready for anything, come spring.

"What will be interesting is what effects this all may have on over-wintering insects and their activity levels next year," remarked Dan Dinelli. "Some other plant material may also be damaged due to dryness. Evergreens and newly planted material, if not watered late into this fall, may suffer through the winter and spring months."

Rick Reed, who stopped buying plants this fall as it became "later and later, and drier and drier," expressed hopes for another shot of rain like early December's 1.5" rainfall. "The worst-case scenario would be going into cold weather without moisture and snow cover," Rick said. "That could lead to major desiccation, major turf loss."

Tom Morgansen, too, had a wish list heading into mid-December. "I'd like to have a few more inches of rain, then two feet of snow cover. Snow would protect the turf and keep golfers off the course." 

Agreed Jeff, "The dry fall was a bonus for construction. We were able to work almost continuously from August 2 through December 1. I think we lost only four working days during this period."

