

FEATURE II

David Marquardt, *Dirt-n-Turf Consulting*



Economical Agronomical Thinking – Part 2 *Labels, Marketing and More*

This is a great time of year. Vacations are ending, yet the rush of a new season is not yet upon us. The GIS is still fresh in our minds, as is the taste of the food and the culture. Now as most of you know, I did not make the GIS this year due to heart surgery. And while I missed the food, chasing a good bottle of wine or two, and seeing so many clients and friends all in one place, the thing I may have missed most was the chance to walk the floor and look at all the 'new and improved' products on the market.

One of my rituals is to try and get acquainted with as many of the new labels as possible so we can make educated recommendations to clients. In these many hours of strolling aisles, it is always interesting to see the ingenuity of manufacturers as they strive to re-package, re-label, and re-price their fertility products. And that is the point I want to address.

As mentioned in the first article, these are some of the more difficult times we have experienced in both the golf and horticulture industries. Trickle-down economics is in full force as many courses cut back on expenses, which equates to less product bought and applied, which equates to less revenue for manufacturers, which equates to more aggressive marketing and packaging strategies. Simply put, in these more difficult times it becomes more prudent than ever to know what you're buying and just how it is affecting the overall chemistry and performance of your soil and turf.

Let's talk numbers. A recent survey, in the February 2009 issue of *Golfdom*, suggests that 34% of golf budgets have been increased, 42% of budgets remain the same, and 23% of budgets have been reduced. The same survey says that if asked to cut, 48% would first cut labor and only 7% would cut fertility. This data comes from polling 652 private, daily fee, and municipal facilities which should be a great cross-section of our industry that probably holds true to my experiences in Chicago and the Midwest. However, with increases in about every area of our expenses over the past year, it would be a safe assumption that a fairly high percentage of the 42% who held to the same budget, really have less buying power. Add this to the 23% who have had budget concessions and we are looking at 65% of the industry with reduced purchasing power.

The first area of prudence comes in reading the label.

While these numbers are very real, they should not be cause for playing Chicken Little. Indeed the same article in *Golfdom* tells us that 56% of courses feel optimistic and 27% neutral for the upcoming year. This leaves only a handful who are pessimistic. From my experience, this is nothing new. Positive attitudes will go a long way toward swaying some of those on the pessimistic side to move on over and join the rest of us in enjoying this great sport and career.

Don't assume that fertility has to suffer because of the present financial situation. Indeed, if superintendents get a little more down and dirty, they will find that there are many ways to save money and do a great job on fertility. The first area of prudence comes in reading the label. I find it interesting that when we sit through a class and an exam for pesticide licensing, most of the time is spent reading and understanding the labels. Labels are explicit and must, by law, tell us what is in the product we are applying. Fortunately, the same is also true for fertilizer products. While labels on organic and biological products may be a bit fuzzy, typical synthetic NPK products are not. Reading and understanding these labels will tell us if the contents are indeed 'new and improved' or just re-packaged. OK, case in point:

(continued on page 12)

In a visit last year a superintendent was finding it a bit too expensive to apply the amount of potassium that he needed to mitigate the salts in his water. When we went to the shop to look at his inventory we discovered that instead of using SOP (0-0-50) as recommended, he had purchased a product with half as much actual potassium. He was told that the other product he had purchased also had some magnesium and a couple of percent of minor elements and was a good product. The cost for SOP is essentially the same as the product with half the rate that he had been using. Simply put, he was paying double just to get a couple percent of magnesium. KMag, which is 11.20% magnesium, is the same price as the other product and has almost three times the amount of magnesium. Similar stories can be told, especially about products containing calcium, but that is fodder for future articles.

Now the 'other' product this superintendent had been using is a very good product, new to the market, and performs very well. But performance was not the question. The question was one of affordability in applying the amount of potassium that the soil and turf needed. If this superintendent's budget was flush, and he wanted to apply twice as much of the other product that would have been fine. The problem is it wasn't. Karl Dannenberger, Ph.D. from Ohio State University, wrote a very nice article that addresses price per unit of fertility. It can be found in the same February issue of *Golfdom*. (This is obviously an issue worth reading while you're cleaning your office and preparing for spring!)

So, if item one is learning to be more aware of the labels on the products we use, then item two is to conduct trials more diligently before making mass changes to your fertility program. Time and space do not allow me to properly deal with this subject. There are many academic types that are far more adept at telling us how to set up trials. The only suggestion (and plea) I want to make is, do more homework before making major changes to your program. We run into clients regularly who have implemented a new foliar program, a new biological program, and a new minor's product, and started to treat their water all at the same time. The problem is that we now have no way to measure the results and effectiveness of the products. Before you upgrade your existing fertility program with 'new and improved' products, we recommend the following:

- Fully evaluate your present program and carefully list the pros and cons.
- Collect soil and tissue data so that you have a baseline against which to measure the trial results.
- Select sites such as nursery, putting greens, target greens, or select greens on the course for your trials. This allows you to measure your treated areas and the untreated.
- And, should you like a product you test, read the label carefully to see just what may be providing the results you are seeing. It may well be that a high shot of iron is providing the color response you are seeing, not a new and improved biological product.

...do more homework before making major changes to your program.

- And finally, repeat your testing so that you can correlate the visual response to the chemistry that is on the label. I wouldn't want to publish results from this simple trial method, but it may well keep you from making expensive mistakes. And finally, utilize the services of the CDGA and the Midwest Golf House. I say this as I applaud the CDGA staff for the trial work they did last year. Their work opened many an eye to the fact that there is little correlation between cost and effectiveness of fertilizer products. I would strongly suggest that you contact their staff and ask for a copy of their fall report. It is often said that if we watch our pennies the dollars will take care of themselves. This has never been truer than it is in our present economy. In that same issue of *Golfdom*, the survey asked where superintendents would cut first if they were asked. Of the respondents, 48% said labor. Perhaps if we, as operators, become more sophisticated buyers and users of our fertility products, then we could keep an extra person employed. **-OC**



Bayer Environmental Science

John Turner
Sr. Sales Specialist - Golf

Tel: 630-443-7807
Fax: 630-443-7839
Mobile: 630-215-6110
john.turner@bayercropscience.com

How To Topdress a Green:

Step 1



Pick up your phone and dial 715-258-8566.

Step 2



Ask to speak with Kari, Jane, or Erica.

Step 3



Schedule your delivery of Fines Free Topdressing Sand...either kiln dried or nondried. Apply as needed!

715-258-8566 • www.WaupacaSand.com
Proud supporter of MAGCS

