

NEWS FROM ALLIED GROUPS

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Riding the Roller Coaster

Six Flags officially opened on May 6th, but we have been riding the roller coaster since March regarding weather conditions. Ten days worth of unseasonably warm weather around St. Patrick's Day set the stage for another season of epic turf stress. Since then, a month of average to below average temperatures have us scratching our heads once again about what challenges and surprises are in store for us when summer arrives.

Old, experienced superintendents become old and experienced by having the ability to adjust maintenance practices according to the weather and the current needs of the turf. They are prepared to play whatever hand Mother Nature deals and have the ability to communicate with golfers regarding the rationale for making modifications to standard turf management practices. They realize that raising a mowing height, switching from grooved to solid rollers, or perhaps not mowing on a really hot day, is just as, if not more, important than having the latest and greatest biostimulant, fertilizer or plant protectant in the spray tank. Experience means making the right decision not to water fairways tonight and encourage an impending Pythium outbreak, even when you know the heat will hit triple digits tomorrow and the crew will be chasing hot spots all afternoon if the humidity suddenly drops.

Unfortunately, *Poa annua* is not very adept about adjusting to change and often folds when Mother Nature deals a bad hand. Somehow, it never fails that *Poa* checks out just before the biggest outing of the season, before the owner wants to play with his best friends or right before the club championship. Let's face it, the only thing you can depend on when it comes to *Poa annua* is that it will be undependable.

Poa doesn't like change. One rapid thaw-freeze cycle during late winter or early spring can produce catastrophic losses of turf on old *Poa*/bentgrass greens. Similarly, one afternoon of severe heat stress can wilt *Poa* into oblivion when roots have died back into the upper ¼-inch of the soil profile. Many climatologists predict more heat during summers and milder, more variable weather for winters in the future for the upper Midwest. Keep in mind, mild, more variable winter conditions will more than likely increase, not decrease, the odds of turf being affected by winterkill.

Fortunately, many golf facilities in the Chicagoland area "get it" regarding the need to address the limitations of putting surfaces dominated by *Poa annua*. A significant percentage of the mid-to-upper end Chicago courses have either fumigated/regressed or have completely rebuilt greens to convert from *Poa* to improved cultivars of bentgrass during the past 10 to 15 years and this number continues to slowly increase every year. Granted, every facility that undertakes a major renovation would probably do something different the next time around, but is anyone really ready to convert those new, sand based, bentgrass greens back to a mixture of *Poa* and old south German bent on native soil?

The interesting question is whether or not a renovation from *Poa* to bentgrass is inevitable for each and every Chicago course that strives to provide fast, firm, consistent putting surfaces for golfers from April through October? Climate change already dictates how we manage our turf...will it also dictate what species we maintain? I'm sure that question will be raised many times during Turf Advisory Service visits this summer. -OC

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