

USGA REPORT

Fall Preparations and El Nino Alert

By John Foy

Throughout Florida it still feels like summer even though the calendar says fall has arrived. Especially in the central to southern part of the state, hot and humid conditions persist, and afternoon thunderstorms are still boiling up on a fairly regular basis. Sept. 10 is the time when peak Atlantic hurricane activity typically occurs, but, so far, the tropics have been quiet. While we certainly can't let our guard down, hopefully we can make it through another season without a direct hit.

Earlier in the summer the Climate Prediction Center noted the development of an El Nino effect in the equatorial Pacific, affecting Florida weather patterns thousands of miles away. In particular, upper level westerly winds disrupt and redirect tropical waves and low pressure systems coming across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa, which, in turn, reduces storms and hurricanes forming and hitting the peninsula. Based on the predictive models, further strengthening of the El Nino effect will occur and is expected to last at least through the upcoming winter months. When a strong El Nino was in place during the winter in the past, Florida and the lower Southeast experienced below-average cool temperatures and above-average rainfall.

Without pronounced environ-

mental extremes, most people have a limited appreciation of the major negative impact on general turf health and course conditioning that occurs from a prolonged period of cool and wet weather. The El Nino winter of 1997/98 stands out and is remembered because of the problems experienced at golf courses throughout the state and the tremendous number of SOS calls received in our office.

On top of cool and damp conditions, increased cloud cover further exacerbated the reduced sunlight of short winter days such that one golf course superintendent so aptly described the situation as "trying to grow grass in a closet." This situation is not conducive to bermudagrass growth and also caused problems with establishing and maintaining a dense and healthy overseeding cover on putting surfaces, tees, and fairways.

While the accuracy of long range weather forecasts still leaves a lot to be desired, given past experiences and the possibility of a moderate to strong El Nino being in place this winter, the importance of good fall preparations and having the base turf in as healthy a condition as possible is critical. A key component is a good fertilization program to maintain sufficient levels of available nutrients in the soil to support balanced and sustained growth while environmental conditions remain favorable.

Unfortunately, at many courses around Florida, the current economic recession has required budget cutbacks, but course fertilization is an area that

should not be compromised. There are no magic elixirs or substitutes for the basic macro- and micronutrients needed to support plant growth.

Especially with putting greens, sufficient leaf surface area is necessary for photosynthesis and, in turn, carbohydrate production and storage. There are no chemical treatments that can replace carbohydrates after they become depleted in the late fall, winter, and early spring. While there will always be pressure from low-handicap golfers for fast to very fast putting speeds, maintaining slightly elevated heights of cut for the next two to three months is especially important to make sure the turf is adequately prepared to survive the winter. This is true regardless of whether the putting surfaces are overseeded.

Keene's Pointe Technician Receives Master Certification

Patrick Ryan, service technician at Keene's Point GC in Wintermere has received the status of Master Technician from the Equipment & Engine Training Council. The EETC is an outdoor power equipment industry association that addresses the quality of service support for your mowing equipment, chain saws, string trimmers, and just about all of the power equipment used on a golf course.

In order for Ryan to qualify for the EETC Master Technician Certification he had to pass six individual certification tests in four-cycle engines,

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