

Common Cents

Surviving Difficult Economic Times

By John Foy

Just a short time ago, the golf industry in Florida was riding the crest of a wave. At most courses and especially during the winter season, the tee-time sheets were completely filled; and even though new-course construction had declined compared to what was going on in the 1990s, things were prosperous.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, tremendous strides have been made in course conditioning and presentation. However, additional costs were incurred to provide the level of conditioning and quality expected and now considered a standard by American golfers.

For many years, the accounting firm of Pannell, Kerr, Forster, has tracked and reported on course operating costs of their clients across the country. While we know that costs have been increasing, it is eye opening to learn just how much they went up in the past 15 years. In 1992, the average maintenance cost per hole for clubs across the U.S. was reported to be \$34,671. By 2007, the average cost per hole for all country clubs was reported to be \$107,190.

In 2008, worldwide demand for basic materials required for the formulation of fertilizers and pesticides, plus skyrocketing petroleum costs, resulted in dramatic jumps in the cost of basic and necessary tools for maintaining healthy turf and producing consistent, good quality overall course conditioning. While the prices of some materials have subsequently declined, for budgeting purposes, a lot of manufacturers and suppliers have suggested figuring on a 25% to 30% increase in the cost of materials for 2009.

On top of all of this, the major downturn in the national and global economy has had a major impact on the golf industry. This is especially true in Florida because so many courses around the state are directly connected

to the real estate development market, which has essentially collapsed. The sad reality is that the wave has crashed onto a very rocky shore, leaving many courses with reduced revenues.

The following are some general suggestions for dealing with a course maintenance budget crunch, or in some cases, crisis:

Written course-maintenance standards and proactive communication with course officials and golfers

First, it should be reiterated that each facility is unique; and over the years we have found that regardless of the budget, the most successful operations share a common characteristic: they have clearly defined and written course maintenance standards, which cover the basic and necessary management programs and practices that need to be performed on a daily, weekly, and annual basis.

Written course-maintenance standards are an integral tool for communicating and educating course officials and golfers about where the dollars are being spent on the golf course. In turn, when it is necessary to reduce the operating budget, the course maintenance standards can be used as a basis for identifying possible cost savings or cuts.

Cost *savings* are defined as items that will result in fewer dollars being spent without having a marked impact on standards and overall conditioning of the primary play areas. Cost *cutting* is where reductions are made that result in a reduction in the standards and overall conditioning.

Focus on sound agronomy and the basic practices for maintaining healthy turf

Managing above- and below-ground growing environments is essential for successful turf management. So, continue to invest in proper aera-

tion and topdressing programs, as well as vegetation control, especially around putting green and tee complexes. Turf grown in a poor environment is less reliable and more expensive to maintain. The same is true for turf that is grown in unfavorable soil conditions. Cutting costs here will result in poor turf performance and a much larger cost down the road.

FERTILIZATION

A return to the basics in fertilization can save hundreds and in some cases thousands of dollars a year. With regard to nitrogen, the use of less expensive, readily available sources such as ammonium sulfate will require that bulk applications on fairways and perimeter rough areas be made on a more frequent basis; but it is still possible to provide very acceptable turf quality, and the turf really doesn't know the difference in the source of the nutrients.

Also, broadcast spray applications of the micronutrients iron and manganese will maintain a very acceptable green color character without excessive growth. Stay focused on the basics of soil pH, phosphorous, and potassium levels. Unless a truly poor quality irrigation water source is being utilized, there is really no justification for regular applications of various soil amendments.

Some cost savings can also be realized with using basic soil testing rather than routinely having extensive analysis run that does not provide a great deal of truly meaningful information.

PEST MANAGEMENT

There is no question that we have heavy weed, insect, and nematode pest pressures on Florida golf courses. As a result, it has been the standard operating procedure to conduct large acreage broadcast pre-emergent herbicide and preventive insecticide treatments. While total elimination of pre-emergent herbicide treatments and preventive insecticide applications is not being suggested, focus efforts down the middle.

Also, the practice of a truly integrated pest management program is being mandated as a more economically and

environmentally sustainable approach to course management. Continually scouting and mapping pest activity, and then following up with localized site-specific treatments are basic components of an integrated pest management program.

To be effective and maintain an acceptable level of pest control through the primary play areas, golf course superintendents and assistant superintendents need to resume an active and committed role in the program. This is true even at facilities that still have the luxury of an IPM specialist or spray tech.

LABOR COSTS

Labor costs (payroll expenses and benefits) have

been increasing over the years; and again according to the Pannell, Kerr, Forster survey, it now consumes 60 percent to almost 70 percent of the annual operating budget. Along with reducing or eliminating overtime hours, hiring freezes and reducing staff have been necessary cost-cutting measures. With fewer people and labor hours available, a return to increased triplex mowing instead of hand-mowing putting surfaces, approaches, and tees is being mandated.

While care does need to be exercised to avoid excessive wear and creation of triplex rings around the perimeters of putting surfaces, reduced hand mowing will not require major compro-



Premium Soil Surfactants with Laminar Flow Technology

Laminar Flow Technology (LFT) is delivered in a proprietary blend of soil surfactants designed to reduce turf physiological stresses found in inherently droughty soils by positively affecting the wetting, rewetting and infiltration rates of soils treated.



Contact Your Local CPS Representative today to find out more about the LFT family of soil surfactants offered by CPS Professional Products.

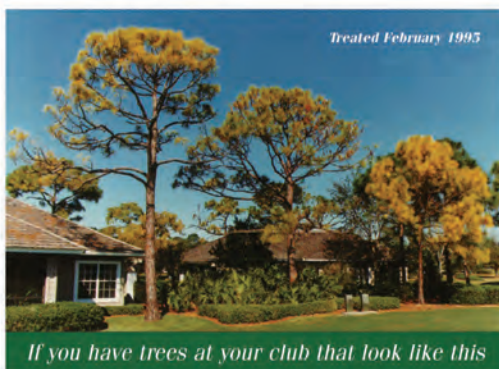
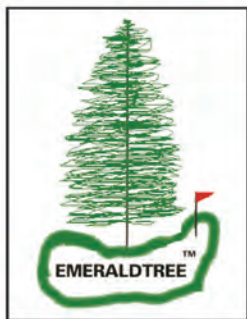
Don't forget our Signature line of fertilizers containing



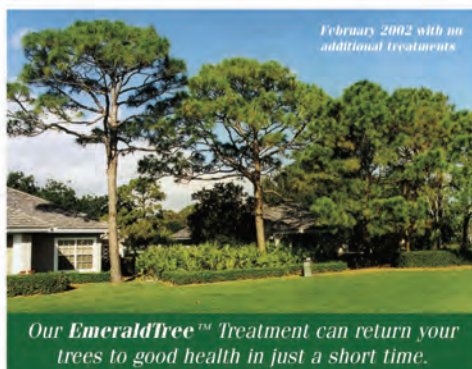
www.cropproductionservices.com

Copyright © 2009, Loveland Products, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

EmeraldTree™



If you have trees at your club that look like this



Our EmeraldTree™ Treatment can return your trees to good health in just a short time.

We can do the same thing for your trees – GUARANTEED!

Do you have sick yellow trees? Do you have some “Key” trees you’re worried about? Don’t cut down another tree needlessly – Save those trees – Treat them with EmeraldTree. Over 95% of our treated trees regain color and vigor and we guarantee the treatment to last a minimum of **THREE YEARS!!** We now offer the Arborjet insecticidal system to protect your trees from Bark beetles. Call Neal Howell @ 251-402-9848, Robert Howell @ 561-523-1295 or call toll free @ 877-779-TREE (8733). Visit our web site @ WWW.Emeraldtree-inc.com.

INDUSTRY NEWS

TORO T.Map and RAIN BIRD MAP EXPERTS

- Map Creation and Maintenance
- Aerial & GPS Data Integration
- Programming & Training Professionals

www.ragantechnical.com
dave@ragantechnical.com

RTS 561.776.9713

Ragan Technical Solutions, Inc.

SPREADRITE, INC.

CUSTOM SPREADING

FERTILIZER • DOLOMITE • GYPSUM
ARAGONITE • HYCAL LIME

FAIRWAY TOP DRESSING

LAMAR SAPP

ART SAPP

6001 S.W. 19th STREET
PLANTATION, FL 33317

MOBILE:

772-201-4000 (ID 158-81-10962)

954-444-0820

mises in quality and conditioning.

Throughout the state, the practice of growth regulator programs on fairways during the growing season has been a common practice for reducing mowing requirements. However, at a lot of courses, the fairways are still being mowed three or even four days a week. Based on my experiences, a mowing frequency of two times per week provides an acceptable play character for average to high handicap golfers. The main tradeoff that must be accepted with a two day a week mowing frequency is an increase in clippings on fairways that are mowed early in the morning before the dew has burned off.

With roughs, a mowing frequency of two times per week has been the standard, and the use of growth regulator treatments is not considered cost effective. A rough mowing frequency of once a week is a cost-saving option, but maintaining a height-of-cut


in the range of 1.0 to 1.25-inch would be advised so that the roughs do not become excessively penal between mowings.

A few negative comments about less definition between the fairway and rough cuts may arise; but it is unlikely that the vast majority of golfers will complain about a lower bermudagrass rough height of cut.

Not changing hole locations and tee markers (except on par-3 tees) on a daily basis are a couple of other small labor-saving options that might be considered.

Getting the staff out of the bunkers is an area where much more significant labor savings can be realized. American golfers have become obsessed with having consistent and perfect bunker conditions, and this has resulted in excessive maintenance of a hazard.

At many courses, it has gotten to the point that more time and money



Legendary greens and bunkers have one thing in common...
they both began with the best soil.

Beneath every meticulously groomed green is dirt. And, the best dirt doesn't just happen. At **Golf Agronomics Supply & Handling** we've been perfecting golf course soil and sand for more than a decade. Our computerized soil blending equipment ensures that the mix you receive meets your exacting specifications – every order, every time. With production facilities located throughout the Southeast, Golf Agronomics offers volume orders and next day service.

GOLF AGRONOMICS SUPPLY & HANDLING

Serving the Carolinas and Florida
800-626-1359 • FAX (941) 955-4690
www.golfag.com

is being spent on bunker maintenance than putting greens. Especially in South Florida, daily raking of all bunkers and mechanical edging monthly and in some cases every two weeks, has been the standard.

Yet complaints about overly soft bunker sand are common. When it is pointed out that excessive cultivation results in the occurrence of soft sand, the standard response from course officials is that daily raking is necessary because the golfers will not or do not know how to re-rake the sand after they have played their recovery shot.

In the Rules of Golf under Section 1: Etiquette: Behavior on the Course, the player's responsibility as far as care of the course is covered. With respect to bunkers, "before leaving a bunker, players should carefully fill up and smooth over all holes and footprints made by them and any other nearby made by others."

Until more golfers are aware of and

accept their responsibilities, it will be very difficult to reduce and control bunker maintenance costs. Complete raking of greenside bunkers two or three times a week, and once a week with fairway bunkers would be suggested as a reasonable standard.

The remainder of the time, spot raking as needed can be practiced and accomplished in conjunction with other tasks such as routine mowing of the greens and tees.

Lastly, filling in and eliminating bunkers that are not necessary and critical to the strategic play of a course, should not be flatly ruled out for producing cost savings.

BOTTOM LINE

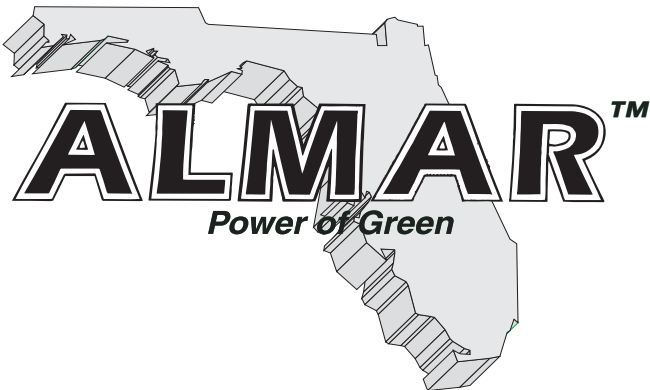
Over the past year and no doubt continuing into the future, cost cutting and savings have been and will be a primary topic of discussion during USGA Green Section Turf Advisory Service visits to courses in Florida and across

the country. All USGA agronomists have been gathering ideas and options for reducing costs; and the suggestions offered in this article are some of the most common; yet clearly far from inclusive.

A big part of what the USGA Green Section does is provide a candid review of how agronomics, economics, and politics impact the golf course maintenance operation. As more golf courses are faced with cost cutting, communication with golfers and course officials will be more important than ever before.

If standards must be lowered, then it is better to get the news out sooner, rather than letting golfers be surprised by them.

If circumstances require your golf course to save money or cut costs, we can help you with the process, as well as communicating the implications to owners or members.

ALMAR™
Power of Green

GREEN CaLITE™ **BEAUTI-GREEN™**
GREEN MAGIC™ **GREEN'S BROTHER™**

(800) 340-3888

AlmarTurf.com

CLASSIC GREENS, INC.



Over 20 years supplying and installing quality Bermudagrass. Our new farm, located in Chiefland, FL is producing quality:

Certified Tifdwarf
Certified Tifway (T-419)
Classic Dwarf
Floratex

Phil Horn, President
11151 NW 70th Ave
Chiefland, FL 32626
(352) 258-2695
philhorn@bellsouth.net

**Golf Course
Athletic Field
Renovations and
Grassing**