

## High fuel prices force operational tweaks

By John Walsh

Superintendents still are paying high prices for fuel, and public facilities seem to be more affected by the higher prices than private facilities.

At the private, nine-hole River Isle Golf Course in Bradenton, Fla., golf course superintendent George Cook, who has a 250-gallon storage tank on site, purchases fuel from suppliers Bradenton Fuel and JH Williams. Cook shops around for fuel because he needs to buy it from more than one source in case one of the suppliers doesn't have it available. For Cook, fuel prices have increased 50 percent more than what they were last year, he says.

"Everybody is experiencing high fuel prices," he says.

Fuel prices for Adam Wright increased 45 percent this year compared to last and 20 percent last year compared to

the year before that. Wright is golf course superintendent at Laurel Oak Country Club, a 36-hole facility in Sarasota, Fla. He purchases fuel from only one supplier, Bradenton Fuel, because it gives him the best price — \$3.03 a gallon for 89 octane.

Across the country, the city of Sacramento, Calif., purchases fuel for the 36-hole Haggin Oaks Golf Complex based on the lowest bid. Currently, the city is paying more than \$3.25 per gallon, according to Sam Samuelson, CGCS. The city-run complex stores fuel in two 1,000-gallon above-ground tanks — one for diesel and one for regular gas.

Despite the increased fuel price, Cook has maintained much of his mowing practices, however, he has increased the size of the rough areas. And by using Primo Maxx, a growth regulator, he can reduce fairway mowings from three or

four times a week to two or three. By reducing the number of mowings, Cook can have a staff member trim trees or edge bunkers instead of hiring another person to do those tasks.

Samuelson, too, says he's been consistent with his mowing practices for areas of maintained turf and has applied plant growth regulators to decrease the number of mowings by one time a week.

Yet the increased fuel price hasn't forced Cook or Wright to change any other areas of their budgets. But that hasn't been the case for Samuelson, who has a maintenance budget of \$2.1 million.

"I've been borrowing from other categories such as labor and supplies," he says. "I've cut back on seasonal workers."

Even though fuel prices have increased, Wright hasn't changed his mowing practices, however, he does try to save money by carpooling workers in utility



vehicles, each of which holds seven gallons of gas.

"Anything helps," he says.

Because of the fuel-price hike, Wright is looking into convert his gas-powered utility vehicle fleet to electric or hybrid vehicles.

Additionally, when one of the facilities' golf courses was renovated recently, low-mow or low-maintenance areas increased, so now 5 percent to 8 percent of the course is considered low maintenance.

Wright says Laurel Oak members don't want to change course conditions and are willing to suck up the increased fuel cost and deal with it until the price comes back down.

Overall, Wright says high-end clubs haven't been affected by the increase in fuel prices and superintendents at those type of clubs aren't changing their maintenance practice much. However, some facilities are more affected by the fuel price hike and are using more plant growth regulators, changing mowing

practices and switching gas-powered utility vehicle fleets to electric ones. Samuelson says the city of Sacramento wants to purchase more electric utility vehicles. Of a fleet of 12, two are electric. All the golf cars on the courses are electric. And Samuelson recently purchased two Jacobsen E-Plex electric triplex mowers.

"The biggest impact of fuel prices is with fertilizer and chemicals," he says. "They have gone up 30 percent. A lot of that has to do with making the materials and shipping them."

Because of the increased cost of fertilizer and chemicals, Samuelson has made fewer applications.

"The budget is tight, and the market is competitive, but you don't want to drop in quality," he says. "The fuel prices are impacting everybody, and it's not going to get better. Sooner or later, the cost of fuel will hit the golfer."

Samuelson says there was a boom of golf course development in Sacramento recently but there are only so many golf-

ers out there.

"You have to put out the best product for the best price," he says, adding that one of the courses at Haggin Oaks is \$50 with a cart on weekends and the other is \$29.

At the same time, Samuelson says the Sacramento market is struggling a bit – one course went out of business last year, and he says he wouldn't be surprised if another went out of business this year or next.

For next year, Cook says he'll prepare the membership and budget for a worst-case scenario regarding fuel prices. If he doesn't spend the budgeted amount because of cheaper fuel prices, it will be an unexpected plus.

"In the past, fuel prices have gone up and down, but not as significantly as recently," Cook says. "The effect of fuel prices on the conditions of the course are ultimately controlled by the membership. They will determine how far back to cut." GCN

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