

BY JOHN WALSH

More than one use

Wetting agents contest localized dry spot and wet turf while reducing labor for a superintendent in Indiana

Golf course superintendents have long turned to wetting agents to combat localized dry spots. John Parker, golf course superintendent at the French Lick (Ind.) Springs Resort, does. But he also uses wetting agents to keep certain areas of the course dry and reduce labor.

There are a lot of improvements being made to the French Lick Springs Resort as part of an overall \$382-million renovation. The resort features the 18-hole Donald Ross Course built

in 1917 that was newly renovated by a team led by architect Lee Schmidt.

"We've been called one of the most originally kept Ross designs in the country," Parker says. "Throughout the years, we've had only one hole changed to build a lake. There are 16 holes that are completely original."

Currently, the Tom Bendelow Course, which was known as the Valley Links and used to be an 18-hole course, is being renovated and converted to a nine-hole course scheduled to open this fall. A casino was built where the old driving range used to

be, and a new one is being built nearby. The casino opened in November 2006 along with the newly renovated French Lick Springs Hotel. A brand new 18-hole Pete Dye course is expected to open in 2008 atop the second highest point in Indiana.

Resort improvements include an increased golf course maintenance budget, from \$450,000 to about \$800,000. Parker says owner Bill Cook wants to restore the historical grandeur of the area (French Lick was home of the largest standing dome, the West Baden Springs Hotel, before the Astrodome was erected, Parker says), improve the quality of the golf courses and meet the higher guest expectations that will be likely once the renovations are complete.

"We've improved the green complexes using Best Sand, and we're using more fertilizer by spraying iron on the fairways," Parker says.

The turfgrass is Penncross bentgrass on the native soil greens and approaches, Quickstand Bermudagrass on the tees and fairways, and turf-type tall fescue in the rough.

"We're in the transition zone, although it's been a rough year for the Bermudagrass because of the cold spring," he says. "We had been using a systemic fungicide with a wetting agent, but now with the Bermudagrass, I don't need the fungicides, so I spray just the wetting agents. On the greens, it's still a mix."

Parker spends about \$3,000 a year on wetting agents and uses them to help cure localized dry spot on greens and fairways. He

Superintendent John Parker spends about \$3,000 on wetting agents annually.
Photo: French Lick Springs Resort



also used wetting agents to help establish sod for greens expansions. Some greens were rectangular and eventually became rounded. Parker used wetting agents to establish the grass in the areas that made the greens rectangular again.

Parker says that when he started at French Lick 11 years ago there was a lot of localized dry spot, but now there has been less because he has been using wetting agents. Using wetting agents also eliminates a lot of labor, such as dragging hoses to certain areas on the courses, even though Parker's crew still drags hoses sometimes.

Because the water Parker uses to irrigate the golf courses has high sodium content and is of poor quality, he can't flush the soils well. So, he uses wetting agents and when it rains, and the combination of rain water and wetting agents helps flush the soils properly.

Parker applies wetting agents starting in late May or early June then reapplies them every three or four weeks on the greens and fairways through the first part of September.

"We have hills and valleys here, and wetting agents help on the high peaks," he says. "Wetting agents also help percolate the water in the valleys to keep them drier."

Parker purchases wetting agents as needed, usually monthly.

"I can't buy a year's supply, but with the new budget, I will buy the 50-gallon barrels to save money."

Parker has tried different brands the past two years but is now stuck on one – Revolution from Aquatrols.

"Ten years ago, if you applied a wetting agent and you didn't water it in right away, it would burn the grass, so I've been cautious," he says. "Now the products are better than 10 years ago, and you can wait a bit before applying water."

Parker applies 6 ounces of Revolution per 1,000 square feet every three to four weeks on the greens. On fairways, he uses Primer Select by Aquatrols. He says the difference between the two is cost.

"I've used Cascade – it's a good product – and a lot of wetting agents," he says. "But Aquatrols conducts research and is

committed to wetting agents, which eases my mind."

Parker spot treats certain areas with wetting agents and makes blanket applications on the greens and fairways throughout the summer. He would like to inject Dispatch into the new, three-row irrigation system (he used to have a two-row system) to reduce labor but hasn't done so yet.

"I'm not using it now but will in a few months after I use the rest of the Revolution," he says. "It's always good to have wetting agents on hand to treat problematic areas."

Parker is convinced wetting agents help organic matter slide off the sand in the soil profile and allow water to collect between sand particles.

"The benefit of wetting agents is you don't have so much dew on the bentgrass, so you'll be less prone to dollar spot," he says. "If you choose not to mow and applied a wetting agent, you don't have dew, but rather a nice green complex because all the moisture goes down into the soil." GCI



John Parker uses wetting agents to help percolate water in valleys to keep them dry. Photo: French Lick Springs Resort