

A collective effort

When drought conditions hit Georgia hard enough to necessitate water restrictions four years ago, many superintendents thought it was unfair they had to follow the same rules as homeowners. Restrictions were loosened slightly so greens and tees could be maintained, but some in the industry weren't comfortable with the direction the regulations were heading. They figured they had to turn the trend around.

"We said we wanted further concessions because we're environmental stewards, and we'll prove it," says Mark Esoda, superintendent at Atlanta Country Club.



Esoda

Since then, a task force has been gathering that proof in the form of more than 200 Georgia golf courses' water usage reports.

"We decided we would be proactive and take initiative to develop best management practices for water conservation," says Richard Staughton, president of the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association and superintendent and manager of Towne Lake Hills Golf Course in Woodstock, Ga. "We wouldn't force our members with a gun to their head, but would say that if we show we're responsible and have a plan to conserve our water, we would be looked upon favorably in a new water plan."

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division and the GGCSA task force signed a memorandum of agreement in 2004. GGCSA member courses were asked to submit reports logging their water use rates, application methods and other conservation efforts.

"We asked people to provide three steps as to how they might conserve water," Staughton says. "We gave examples of what they could do, like only water the driving range once a week, or instead of mowing 85 acres at 2 inches, find five acres and don't irrigate them at all."

Committee members sent templates to superintendents to complete, hoping for 75-percent participation among association members. Course operators were given three years to return the report. Given the far-away

deadline, many superintendents put the project on the backburner at first, Esoda says. The responses trickled in, until six months before the deadline, when the committee was flooded with them.

The submissions returned exceeded the committee's expectations. About 91 percent of the 230 GGCSA-member courses participated. There are about 400 golf courses in the state.

The reports still are being analyzed, but the water sources and conservation methods vary from course to course.

The committee sent volunteers to golf courses and held classes to try to encourage participation in the program. Superintendents realize water supplies aren't endless, but it wasn't until early summer – when the state experienced some of its driest months on record – that it really hit home, Staughton says.

"Like a lot of things, people say they'll try, but when it gets down to the nitty-gritty and they force restrictions onto you, people take it a little more seriously," he says. "We started the year watering what we wanted."

That's not the case anymore. Drought conditions weren't getting any better in the state in May as the last of the BMP entries were filtering in. Courses were ordered to follow a stage-two, drought-watering restriction, which puts them on the same schedule as residential water users. They can water the fairways three days a week. Tees and greens are exempt.

"It caught people's attention when they told us when we could water," Staughton says.

Staughton doesn't think the regulations are fair because water sources for golf courses are different than for homeowners.

"There's always the perception that golf courses use a lot of water," Staughton says. "We're using water you're not going to use at home, per se. We use nonpotable or pond water. We're not using drinking water."

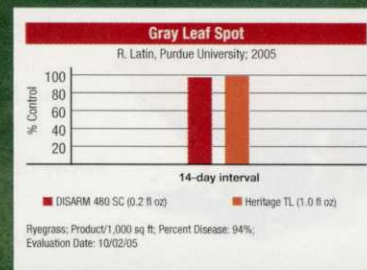
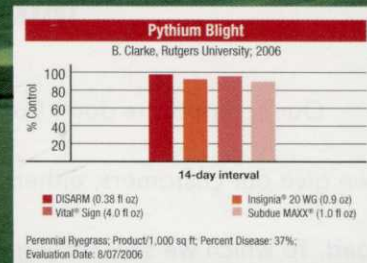
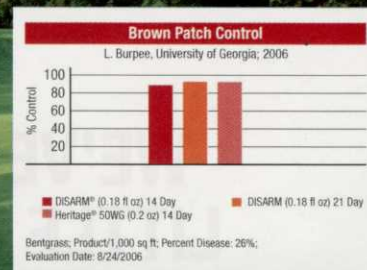
The golf industry is the only industry in the state that's being regulated and the only industry that has signed an agreement with the Georgia EPD, Esoda says. Esoda and Staughton hope they can work out water-usage rules that meet each course's unique needs yet keep conservation in mind.

"It's been positive getting regulators to listen to us," Esoda says. "It will help when we go to the review table for water rules." – HW

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