

Golf facilities operated by management companies, like Billy Casper Golf-run Ka'anapali Golf Resort in Hawaii, may benefit from group pesticide-purchasing discounts.

Realistic expectations

Difficult economic times force superintendents to rethink pesticide use.

Golf course superintendents are an imaginative lot, adept at squeezing every last penny out of their annual operating budgets, whether that means coaxing an old mower through one more season or timing chemical applications to weather conditions to maximize efficacy.

Stung by last year's high fuel prices, superintendents and course managers have been in a savings mode for at least 12 months, if not longer. With the onset of a deepening recession and anticipation of less revenue because of a possible decrease in rounds in 2009, turf managers will be looking even closer for ways to save money.

Brian Long, superintendent at Doublegate Country Club in Albany, Ga., has a mandate from ownership to cut his maintenance budget by \$100,000 this year. He plans a \$20,000 reduction in the fertilizer and pesticide line items.

"I feel I can have this reduction without really changing my pesticide program," he says. "I just plan to watch my spending."

The economy will affect Paul Brandenburg's operation dramatically.

"We'll definitely purchase less control products this year," says the certified golf course superintendent at Furman University Golf Course in Greenville,

BY JOHN TORSIELLO

S.C. "We'll become more curative and less preventive. I will cut down on pesticides when possible. I anticipate more spot treatments rather than broadcast treatments."



Long

One of the cost-saving measures Brandenburg instituted this year was to take advantage of early order programs that allow him to receive discounts on pesticide purchases. He's already stocked for the entire year. Others, such as Brian Powell, CGCS, at Old Chatham Golf Club in Durham, N.C., purchased pesticides early but will delay their delivery until he needs to use them.

ACCEPTING HIGHER THRESHOLDS

Because of the questionable state of the economy and a resulting tighter budget, Gari Scherting, superintendent at Palm Valley Golf Club in Goodyear, Ariz., plans to accept higher thresholds when it comes to pests on the course. He'll cut down on pesticides, and that relates to his IPM program.

"From what I hear from other superinten-

dents, some are cutting way down on applications and say they'll basically worry about the outcome rather than using preemergent chemicals. Others say they'll continue with applications but will be more efficient with what they use," Scherting says.

Jeffrey Connell, superintendent at Columbia Country Club in Blythewood, S.C., agrees acceptance of higher thresholds for pest incursions will have to be tolerated in light of the current state of the industry.

"These times will allow for higher thresholds," he says. "These levels will be tested, and the lines of communication between golfers, management and superintendents will be tested as well. You'll have to address the issue before it becomes a visual problem for the course."

Informing paying customers what's happening on the course and why, as well as what they can expect regarding daily conditions will be key to establishing a realistic set of expectations among golfers.

Targeting specific areas of the course that have had pest problems previously will help superintendents spot treat more effectively and avoid widespread damage.

"The use of mapping and GPS hot spots, or target areas, on the course and treating just those high priority areas, while letting others tolerate higher disease and pests, is something we may have to do," Connell says.

CUTTING BACK CAREFULLY

While economic realities call for a bit of tough love for their courses, superintendents and managers are hesitant to alter their IPM programs significantly.

"If you view turf quality as an infrastructure component, it would be shortsighted to take such a risk there," says Bryan Bielecki, vice president of agronomy for Billy Casper Golf.

BCG is looking to save small percentages of money on several line items, so, in aggregate, the company isn't compromising or risking large-scale impacts.

"The cost to recover is just too high from a material and client perception standpoint," Bielecki says.

The superintendents who report to Dan



Scherting



Above: Judd Newsome, superintendent at The Ranch Golf Club in Southwick, Mass., says the downturn may help lower golfers' inflated expectations. Right: Billy Casper Golf-managed facilities, like Wintonbury Hills Golf Course in Bloomfield, Conn., are looking to save small percentages from several line items that won't have large-scale impacts.



Evers, regional director of agronomy for Casper's Mid-Atlantic region, monitor turf-grass conditions vigorously, observe the weather and time pesticide applications to help reduce the number of plant protectant applications, thus saving money.



Bielecki

Dave Wasenda, owner of Appliedgolf, a management and consulting firm that operates eight facilities in New Jersey, Maryland, South Carolina and Indiana, also is hesitant to tinker with IPM programs and pesticide purchases.

"The economy has made us rethink our strategy with our overall operation of the golf course; however, pesticides are something we really don't want to fool with in the big scheme of things," he says.

Because companies like Billy Casper Golf and Appliedgolf oversee, own or manage numerous courses, they benefit by having superintendents order pesticides as a group to obtain discounts on large purchases.

A CATCH-22

There can be a Catch-22 logic when looking for ways to reduce operating budgets. For example, if Jedd Newsome's labor budget was reduced, he'd have to look at changing how he cares for The Ranch Golf Club in Southwick, Mass., where he's superintendent.

"That would probably bring more pesticides into use," he says. "This is what many people don't understand. If we have thatch and we're limited in labor, we have no way to remove thatch effectively without disrupting play. So what's the situation if I can't remove thatch and it breeds disease? Spray, of course. One fairway application can cost between \$7,000 and \$8,000, and that costs more than half of what I pay a laborer for the season."

Newsome believes it's vital for superintendents to communicate such concerns to ownership to avoid having to use more pesticides in the long run.

Ben Ratzlaff will continue to spray pesticides preventively on the greens at River Oaks Golf Course in Cottage Grove, Minn., four or five times this season but spot treat as needed in the fairways and elsewhere.

"You have to be careful before you make any big changes in your pesticide program," Ratzlaff says.

The last thing Scott Ledet wants to do is curtail his preemergent pesticide program.

"I'm going to keep doing what I've been doing since the course opened 10 years ago," says the superintendent at Gray Plantation Golf Course in Lake Charles, La. "You cut back on your preemergents, and it ends up costing you more in the long run to fix the problem. While I may tolerate a few more pests on our driving range, I won't on our greens, tees and fairways."

SPENDING LESS

Ledet plans to keep it old school, which means using less expensive products whenever possible, putting up with a few more problem areas away from the main playing surface and cleaning up eyesores when they occur.

Powell believes spending less on chemicals is simply a matter of good business.



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"The majority of superintendents I speak with are always looking for ways to spend less money and be more efficient in their operations," he says. "That alone dictates using pesticides only where needed and only when no other effective alternative exists."



Evers

One way to reduce the amount of pesticides used preventively or curatively is to reduce the amount of area that's highly maintained.

"We just won't be managing the rough areas farther out from the fairway," Ledet says. "You tolerate a few more problems out there than you used to."

Superintendents will use generic pesticides as another way to save money.

"I'm not 100-percent sold on generics, but I'll research the companies," Long says. "I've used generics in the past, and they're a good way to cut costs, but you have to be careful because some may not be worth the savings."

Superintendents at Appliedgolf-managed properties have used generics but that doesn't mean all products used are generic.

"We always ask our superintendents to talk to their peers and compare notes," Wasenda says. "If a good report on a new or generic product is made, it's usually tried."

But some superintendents are hesitant to opt for widespread use of generic pesticides, even in the face of budget restraints.

"I'll consider buying generics but probably won't," Brandenburg says. "I feel a brand loyalty to the companies that did the original research and development."

Powell agrees, citing the larger chemical manufacturers still do a lion's share of the research or research funding.

"It's important our industry supports them, so that advancements that lead to more efficient products continue to come to market," he says.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

The harsh realities of a deep and long-term

economic recession and fears about what that might mean to the golf industry worry managers. Communication and collaboration at all levels of management and staff will be important to a golf course's physical health and fiscal viability during the next several years.

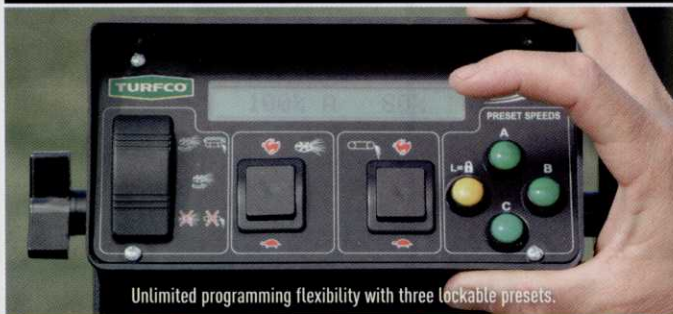
"Almost everyone I talk to has had their budgets reduced," Newsome says. "They all do their best to educate boards and owners about the ramifications of doing so. It is a tough time, no doubt."

But the situation may be a blessing in disguise.

"Expectations (for course conditions) have gone through the roof," Newsome says. "We have 20 handicappers complaining because the bunkers aren't consistent. We're all going to be forced to cut somewhere, which may not be a bad thing. Maybe some of the lofty expectations will come back down a bit. Greens will always be a priority, but some other areas may fall to the wayside a bit."

Furman University Golf Course's motto for 2009 will be, "Concentrate on the ba-

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Operators at Appliedgolf-managed facilities like Knob Hill Golf Club in Manalpan, N.J., are hesitant to tinker with pesticide programs, even in tough times.

sics: good greens, good playing surfaces and customer service,” Brandenburg says, adding that mantra will go a long way toward smoothing any irritation or concern golfers feel when encountering less-than-perfect course conditions.

Yet Wasenda cautions course owners and managers not to cut too deeply into maintenance budgets. He acknowledges the reality of difficult economic times and that many businesses are anticipating declining revenues, which means adjustments in expenses.

“Adjust the improvements budget before the operating budget,” he says. “Nothing

is worse to a superintendent than making improvements with not enough money to maintain the standards of the core playing surfaces.

“My best advice for owners and managers is to be realistic with your superintendent from the start, or as soon as you know things need to change. If there’s a financial crunch, manage the entire number of the budget and not the details like pesticide purchases.” **GCI**

John Torsiello is a freelance writer based in Torrington, Conn.

