

TAKING RESEARCH FOR GRANTED?

The writer Aldous Huxley once said humans have an absolute and infinite capacity for taking things for granted.

In the golf industry, that's a justifiable allegation amid news the USGA Green Section and GCSAA suspended new research initiatives this year, cutting \$300,000 and about \$75,000, respectively. That's about 15 projects that won't be funded or will be delayed a year.

I'm not suggesting the USGA and GCSAA take turfgrass research for granted – the USGA will fund more than \$1 million of ongoing research, and the GCSAA will spend about \$100,000 on current projects. But because the impact of the research cuts won't be felt immediately, it makes you wonder how concerned the rest of the industry is with the cuts, and whether most people even know about them. In the short term, foregoing new research seems like a small price to pay. But consider what the long-term repercussions may be.

An obvious effect is a delay in the results of the projects in limbo. What's not so obvious is how many of those studies are aimed at reducing inputs, maximizing water use or other green goals. Considering the other troubles the industry faces, it doesn't need to lose any headway it's made with environmental stewardship.

Another downside to the research cuts is they've compounded the institutional cuts universities have experienced for years. What does that mean? There's a chance vacant turfgrass faculty positions will go unfilled and/or scientists will be conservative with their current efforts. Many projects they undertake come from superintendent suggestions; rigid budgets hinder their ability to be nimble and pursue these projects as they arise at a grassroots level.

The worst-case scenario is underfunded university turf programs may be cut altogether. Faculty members are pressed to obtain research funding because that's how state universities generate most of their income. For example, only 14 percent of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's income is tuition-based; half comes from research, says associate professor John Stier, Ph.D. With tight state budgets, universities are scrutinizing individual departments. Research programs that aren't being funded may be

in jeopardy. If a university cuts a research program, then its education component (classes) and outreach component (assistance professors provide superintendents) are likely to follow, Stier says.

How often do you turn to state universities for turfgrass-related answers? Stier estimates he receives two to six requests per day from superintendents. He's just one person. There are between 150 and 200 researchers like him across the country.

Again, this is a worst-case scenario. There isn't going to be a mass exodus of turf researchers tomorrow. But we've all heard the Joni Mitchell lyrics, "You don't know what you've got till it's gone." No peer network, association staff, magazine or conference can replace the void created by a lack of research.

Thankfully, some groups are aware of the decline of traditional funding. Considering this year's cuts, the Carolinas GCSA new solution – a way to get golfers to subsidize turf research – comes just in time. Last summer, North Carolina State and Clemson University faculty told the CGCSA board that funding sources were shrinking and they needed more help. Soon after, the CGCSA began work on Rounds4Research, a program centered

on an online auction in which golfers bid on donated golf packages. Facilities throughout the Carolinas have chipped in 250-plus rounds to date.

The CGCSA isn't sure how much revenue Rounds4Research, a concept spearheaded by CGCSA director of programs Tim Kreger, will generate, but the goal is to directly fund N.C. State and Clemson researchers' projects with all the proceeds. Paul Jett, CGCSA at Pinehurst No. 2 and president of the CGCSA, hopes to begin that process as soon as the association tallies the earnings. The auction runs April 19 to May 6.

Programs with similar goals, such as designating a day when facilities donate \$1 per round toward research, worked for a few years before losing steam. Let's hope Rounds4Research, and creative ideas in other regions, will be successful enough to prove the industry isn't taking turf research for granted. GCI



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