



# Crystal clear

By Jason Stahl

Golf course water usage is a lightning rod for controversy. Tips for successfully educating others about your course's water strategy.

**M**ark Esoda, CGCS, calls applying water to turfgrass for the optimum combination of playability and turf health "insanely difficult" to do. Every golf course superintendent on the planet knows that, but the trick is getting members to grasp that concept.

"They get enlightened when you tell them how many sprinkler heads you have and how much control you have and how often you scout and change and adjust each day," says Esoda of Atlanta Country Club. "It becomes a real eye opener for any layman who doesn't manage water for a living."

Esoda says the conversation at committee meetings at his club typically revolves around playability, with members expressing their preference for drier conditions. Esoda and his crews will then make

adjustments to achieve those conditions.

Another common concern among Atlanta CC members is whether the course has enough water. In this day and age when everyone falls under restrictions at some point or another, this is becoming a frequent worry.

"Our general response is, 'Yes, we have enough for the grass, but not for the aesthetics,'" Esoda says. "And we tell them you can't pump water just to keep a lake full; you have to manage your volume and how much you use. That tends to turn people into supporters where they'll say, 'Hey, it has been really dry and I can't believe the course is so good!'"

The key is to communicate early and often so members are kept apprised of what's going on. A monthly newsletter goes a long way in this regard;

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the July edition will often talk about water conservation and how members can play their part by restricting watering at home.

“The regulatory community likes for us to pass along information to our constituents to help them understand to not use irrigation as a toy but as a limited resource,” Esoda says.

Esoda says he has a good relationship with the local homeowners association, so for

the most part they understand the course’s water needs. Their main concern is not the club’s water use but the flooding that occurs in the lower parts of the course near the Chattahoochee River. If a resident did accuse the club of stealing water out of a pond, they could put an article in the homeowners association’s magazine to clear things up.

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them, you’ll have a better chance of getting people on your side when there are issues of completely dry lakes and the fingers first get pointed at the course when all my neighbors are actually pulling the water out and not me,” he says.

Esoda also encourages superintendents to join water associations as a way to spread the truth about golf courses’ water use. He belongs to the Georgia Association of Water Professionals and the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper. “The message to the community is that we are a business and have unintended benefits to them: green space, wildlife habitat, etc,” he says. “And we support the community through jobs. The difference between the grass in your front yard and my course is jobs – it doesn’t need more water or fertilizer, we just mow it more. When we’re attacked and our water use is called ‘non-essential consumptive,’ we say imagine going to dirt. The unintended consequences would be worse: runoff, silt, loss of habitat, etc. It’s better to encourage good management, use and conservation then cut somebody off. Then what do you do with those people now out of work in this economy?”

Ken Gorzycki, director of agronomy at Horseshoe Bay Resort in Horseshoe Bay, Texas, also finds it pays off to be involved in local water associations. He serves on water conservation and water management committees of the Lower Colorado River Authority.

“Staying involved allows you to handle things on a proactive rather than reactive basis,” he says.

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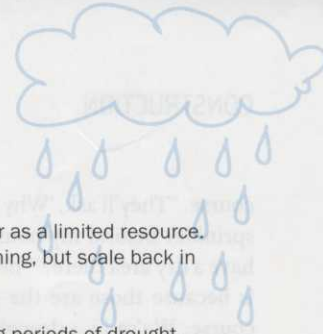
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## Key points

- Remember, most people have no idea what goes into managing water as a limited resource.
- Be up front and honest about why decisions are made to water one thing, but scale back in other areas.
- Be proactive and get involved in your community.
- Maintain constant communication about water issues, not only during periods of drought.
- Keep your emotions in check when discussing water-usage policy. Advise members to do the same if they engage in water-usage conversations with community members.
- When appropriate, dispel the stereotype that golf courses are water hogs and pass along the positive story of how the golf industry is a responsible steward of water resources.
- Stick to layman's terms when discussing water-related issues



Top Left: Drilling a well at ACC. Above: Adding wire for more stations for greater irrigation efficiency.

That proactive approach – and keeping emotions out of the conversation – has helped him avoid battles with the members and community when the topic of water comes up.

“I just stick to the facts,” Gorzycki says. “I let it be known that we all need to be conserving water, not just on the course but on home lawns as well. I keep reminding members and area residents that we’re in the middle of a drought and we all need to do our share to get through it.”

Gorzycki tells people that he uses mostly reclaimed water, and he only supplements it with raw water out of the lake when absolutely necessary. Like Esoda, he believes the golf industry has a good story to tell when it comes to using water.

“We’re perceived as being this big, huge water hog, but in fact we only use half of one percent of the available water, and any good water conservation plan is looking for a 10 to 20 percent reduction at minimum,” he says. “We don’t need to apologize for our water use; we need to take credit for the things we’re doing well with water conservation.”

The question Gorzycki gets most often from members regarding water has to do with their own personal lawns versus the

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course. "They'll ask, 'Why don't you run that sprinkler behind my house more because I have a dry area there?'" he says. "My answer is because those are the perimeters of the course. We're in a drought, so we're maintaining more down the middle of the course, and the perimeters will scorch some during the heat of summer. We will put some irrigation [on the perimeters], enough to keep them alive but not enough to keep it lush. We need to be reducing our irrigated area, not increasing it."

Another frequent request from people is to put water into near empty streams behind their houses to flush them out, but Gorzycki must again put on his water steward hat.

"I explain to them that it's just not a good use of the water," he says. "I tell them that when we get a rainfall, it will flush those streams out and make them healthy again to support wildlife. It's not a good perception in the community either to see water running down a creek to flush it out."




Mark Esoda: "The message to the community is that we are a business and have unintended benefits to them: green space, wildlife habitat, etc."

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– Mark Esoda, Atlanta Country Club

Even the mayor once asked Gorzycki if he could put water in certain areas he felt could use it, and he had to remind him that they were still in a huge drought and that wouldn’t be a smart use of water.

“A lot of people get tunnel vision. Our golf course community has a constant level lake, but the lakes that feed it are not constant level. Also, we have a power plant on our lake that has to maintain a certain level. Because our lake is full, they forget that other lakes are below 40 percent capacity. You have to keep reminding them that just because our lake is full doesn’t mean we have unlimited water to use.”

Gorzycki gets the word out to members via a weekly email that features a column written by him, and a monthly newsletter.

“Even during cooler, wetter times when water use is not much of a focus, I keep trying to remind them that we still need to conserve water even though we just got a rain a few weeks ago because we’re still under a drought,” he says.

John O’Keefe of Preakness Hills Country Club in Wayne, New Jer-

sey, says his members for the most part understand his water strategy, but they do often ask why his crews are still “pulling hoses” after installing a \$1.4 million irrigation system 10 years ago.

“Then I go into a dissertation on how they still don’t have many irrigation systems with a set of eyeballs, and you don’t want to turn on a head that will irrigate a 120-foot diameter circle when you only need to water two or three spots on a green,” he says.

Once in awhile, members will also ask general watering questions, and O’Keefe will explain to them in layman’s terms why a plant sometimes needs help.

“I use the analogy of working out. If you’re really starting to get hot and sweaty, what’s the first thing you do? You take a light drink of water. A plant is no different. If it’s a hot day out there, the plant is trying to keep up with its cooling process and it just doesn’t do enough, so you have to give it a light shot with a syringing.”

One question O’Keefe doesn’t receive is, “Why aren’t you putting more water down?” Like the members at Atlanta CC, his members prefer dry conditions for more roll.

“They don’t want to see the whole place golden brown, but they would rather see it a little firm with a little wilt here or there or off color rather than lush green and really wet,” he says. “We try to provide that the best we can. I have three assistants, and we’re out there watching the course on a daily basis.” GCI

Jason Stahl is a Cleveland-based write and frequent GCI contributor.



Rain water harvesting at ACC.

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