

PRESERVING HISTORY... AND WATER

Meadow Club's David Sexton details his high standards for water conservation. by Helen M. Stone

Tucked away in the mountains by the San Francisco Bay, the Meadow Club is a pristine hideaway near one of California's most developed areas. In 1927, Dr. Alister MacKenzie designed his first golf course in the United States in Fairfax, taking advantage of the wide-open native grasslands and breathtaking vistas. The British golf course architect, whose designs were considered among the finest in the world, had already designed courses on three other continents.

The course rapidly became a Bay Area institution, but the original design was gradually compromised as more and more trees were planted. Director of Grounds Management David Sexton, CGCS, ruefully admits to contributing to the overgrowth more than 30 years ago when he came aboard. "If I had it to do over, I wouldn't have planted as many trees back in the '80s because we're taking them out now," he says. "The Meadow Club was called that for a reason."

In 1998, under the direction

of golf course architect Mike DeVries, the club began a six-year restoration to MacKenzie's original vision. The slow renovation place allowed for members to keep playing the course and gradually become accustomed to the newly-opened landscape and unique bunkers. The current superintendent, Sean Tully, was hired as an assistant shortly before the renovation, and took the course helm when Sexton "semi-retired" in 2010.

During and after the restoration, water conservation was always in the forefront of Sexton's consciousness. "The irrigation system was upgraded, but it wasn't replaced," he says, noting the present irrigation system was installed in 1984. "We've kept very close records from year to year; now going on over 20 years. We've had the SitePro(R) and weather station and we've created a pretty good site-specific model."

Sexton takes full advantage of irrigation technology. "We probably have 80 or 90 various irrigation programs that we run and we have five TDR 300 moisture meters that we use all over the course."

Sexton sets high standards for his water conservation efforts. "I take the ETs I get from my weather station and compare that to the water we pump and purchase; I keep track from year to year and I come up with a value of how much I'm pumping in relation to the amount of ET that the course needs,"



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he explains. "So I have a true weather-adjusted value that I can compare year to year, with the goal to improve it every year. We managed to improve for eight years... last year was the first year that we didn't."

Sexton took that as a call to action. "That tells me I need to get in there and take a good look at all the sprinklers. So this year we're going in and doing a complete top-to-bottom cleaning and replacing parts," he says.

The pump controllers are slated for an upgrade, as well. "We're also changing the pumps to a variable frequency drive. It's about a \$55,000 job, but it should give me a smoother system with less water hammer

and run everything at a lower pressure," he explains. "I think it will be a very positive improvement and keep the replacement of the irrigation system in the far future. And we can get back on track and improve our water savings every year."

In addition to technology, intensively managed turf has been replaced with native species. "We've probably knocked off 15 acres of turf," Sexton notes. "We lead an annual nature walk on the course. We're in tune with the natural world and the members support that." **GCI**

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