

AFTER THE FIRE

In 2011, fire consumed FarmLinks maintenance facility.
The hard lessons they learned to build it back.



by Trent Bouts

In the two years since fire razed his headquarters at FarmLinks Golf Club at Pursell Farms in Sylacauga, Ala., golf course superintendent Mark Langner still gets “burned” now and then. Most recently, he was about to dispatch a crew for some tree work when it dawned on him that a critical safety harness had gone up in the blaze. That \$200 to \$300 harness was just one more “little thing” Langner had omitted to claim on insurance. Buying a replacement now meant another nick in the current budget, not to mention delays on the tree project.

“Oh golly, I can’t begin to tell you the number of little things, little trinket pieces of equipment, that you might only use once or twice a year that you forget you had in the building,” Langner says. Can’t begin to tell ... that’s no mere figure of speech. By his own admission, Langner’s record keeping was incomplete and what he had was fragmented. Of course, even some of what he did have went up in smoke.

In the end, insurers honored more than \$3 million in claims but the payout would and should have been more had Langner known exactly what equipment was lost and what it was worth at the time. Instead, he and his team poured countless hours over weeks and months into pulling together as many pieces of the puzzle as they could find or recreate from vendor records. That sleuthing itself was costly in terms of man-hours and as just as significantly as Langner says, “It takes you away from what you’re supposed to be doing.”

At this point in the story, most, if not the vast majority, of superintendents should be shifting a little uneasily in their seats. If not, then try this brief exercise Langner recommends: “Just sit for a few minutes and consider where you would be, and where your facility would be, if you suddenly lost everything on your computer, on your bookshelf, in your entire building?”



Construction of the new maintenance facility at FarmLinks Golf Club at Pursell Farms in Sylacauga, Ala.

Check out the iPhone/iPad app to watch amateur video of fire consuming the FarmLinks maintenance facility. Or, enter bit.ly/WwdaAY into your web browser to access the same video online.



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COVER STORY



The frame of the new maintenance facility as it was under construction.

Poof!

Gone! It wouldn't have to be fire. It could be a tornado, flood, landslide, earthquake. It could be who knows what, or when. "If you lost it all, what's your plan?" Langner asks. "What's your path for going forward?" Two years out from the fire, he is in a position to offer some recommendations.

It is important to note here that Langner is anything but some novice who has been caught out by his own inexperience. On the contrary, he has more than 20 years in the industry under his belt and carries the formal designation of director of agronomy and applied research at FarmLinks, which remains one of the most forward-thinking facilities in the country. There he manages 10 varieties of turf across 600 acres that provide resort level golf as well as a real-world R&D laboratory. As part of his role he hosts more than 600 superintendents from across the country every year. It is not a job for the timid or the untalented.

For good measure, it's also worth noting that Langner hosted the Alabama State Amateur Championship at FarmLinks just three months after the fire. Reviews from players and officials were uniformly glowing.

Broadly, Langner's recommendations to colleagues go like this: take a complete inventory, make sure your insurance covers what you think it does, maintain a thorough back up of your records and keep it off site, then devise an emergency response plan. On its face, that list seems like simple common sense, because it is.

But as Langner and any other superintendent who makes it through his or her first 24 hours understands, stuff comes up. Schedules and priority lists become what you try and take care of between the unexpected. So while everyone likely appreciates that everything on Langner's list of recommendations is crucial, they could probably rattle off a longer list of more urgent concerns without a second's thought. Until, as was the case at FarmLinks, lightning strikes. Then it's way too late.

Demolition of the FarmLinks maintenance facility following the 2011 fire. (Inset) the damage done by the fire, which started in the early morning.

Inventory

In terms of knowing what he had, and proof that he had it, he was in “pretty good shape with the big ticket items,” Langner says. But from there the paper trail – whether physical or virtual – frayed and faded to varying degrees. His tip for a quick fix is to walk the entire maintenance facility with a video camera, or these days even a cell phone, filming every inch, high and low. Ironically, Langner remembers his father doing just that at the family home “when VHS first came out” decades earlier and he had even done it at his own home, but never at the golf course.

“That will give you a quick record and it’s something you can do once a year to stay up to date,” he says. “But the best investment is in a good inventory management system.” By chance, Langner had purchased just such a system shortly before the fire but had only just started loading data. You can bet that system is now full of all the new equipment that has rolled in since March, 2011.

A crude but effective alternative could be a scanner which Langner points out can be bought for “\$100 or less” allowing for anything in print to be digitized. At FarmLinks that could have preserved all kinds of data such as soil and tissue test outcomes not to mention decades of research at the property. “I think that’s the thing that pains me most is losing a lot of that research that was all on paper,” Langner says.

The costs incurred as a result of incomplete records went beyond a shortfall in the insurance claim. “It has created all kinds of inefficiencies because we did not have the tools when we needed them or the data or the knowledge to use in our decision-making,” Langner says. “It’s hard to put a value on that but you can bet it’s been significant. It absolutely sets us back and I wouldn’t say we have fully recovered yet.”



Insurance

Having insurance is one thing, but having the right insurance is another thing altogether. Superintendents should make a point of sitting down with their general manager, chief financial officer or comptroller with a copy of their existing policy in front of them, Langner says.

“A lot of times policies are entered into by someone who may not really understand the extent of what needs to be covered and what replacement values are involved,” he says. “Being underinsured can be very detrimental to a property.”

Again, Langner admits those were conversations he didn’t have prior to the fire although he has had “a lot” since. “Take the cost of a Triplex, or a sprayer, or a fairway unit,” he says. “Those are items that have increased significantly in cost over the last five years or so. If you find you’re \$10,000 or \$15,000 short on coverage then you’ve got to find that money or get yourself replacement equipment that is older or maybe not of the same quality.”

It’s not only equipment prices and values that change. Langner notes that the myriad codes and regulations golf course maintenance operations are subject to can also be moving targets. Setting up a new facility to current standards may require a lot more than those that were in place when a policy was written.

Back-up

It could have been worse. Langner had his entire OSMAC SitePro irrigation program backed-up on a thumb-drive and stored outside the maintenance building. Newer systems provide automatic back-up off-site. But few superintendents have an office outside the maintenance facility like Langner does at FarmLinks. The point being that even if there is a thumb-drive, or any backed-up materials, it must be kept elsewhere to be of any value.

All of Langner’s “as built” records were destroyed in the fire, irrigation, drainage, you name it. That’s like the 21st-century equivalent of losing the career assistant who was there when the course was built in 1975 and can remember where all sorts of things are under the surface. That’s a kind of institutional knowledge that can be immensely valuable ... when you have it. Imagine starting the whole budget process without last year’s spreadsheet to work from, let alone a long-term record.

An event doesn’t necessarily have to be catastrophic in nature like a fire or a tornado to be extremely damaging, Langner points out. A simple, and far more common, computer crash can be extremely problematic if that computer was sole repository for the information it held. Fully-automated back-up services abound today and some are even free.

Plan

Langner took the call about the fire shortly after 6 a.m. There was definitely a sense of urgency as he made the 40-minute drive to the golf course. It was too late to do anything by the time the blaze was discovered. In effect, Langner was thrust into recovery mode even before reality had a chance to set in. He wasn't speeding to the golf course but he was flying by the seat of his pants, suddenly making it up as he went.

There had to be new answers, not only to where replacement equipment was going to come from, but even to things that were never questions in the past. "Where are you going to store things, where does your crew wash up, that kind of thing," Langner says. "I'd encourage everyone to take one day during winter and sit down with your team and lay it all out. Do you have protocols? What's your plan if you suddenly lost it all? You could look at it as developing BMPs for catastrophic events."

Even though every course has insurance, even though every superintendent knows disasters happen, and even though Langner and his crew had helped colleagues recover from tornadoes only months before, he admits, "The reality that it can happen to you doesn't become a reality until you're the one it happens to."

There is a YouTube video, easily enough found, that shows the FarmLinks facility aflame. With unnerving regularity the roar of the flames is interrupted by the pop or bang of something exploding. The explosions could be fuel tanks, acetylene, or perhaps the 20 cases of aerosol paint Langner just bought in readiness

for the State Am. Whatever the source, the danger on display led Langner to take one more important step as FarmLinks rebuilt.

He and the local fire chief now boast a close working relationship. As reconstruction progressed, Langner kept the fire chief informed about what the new facility would be like, what the layout would be and what would be stored where. He has invited the chief for several visits and now both have a solid understanding of how to

help each other – a) avoid a blaze and b) respond should one occur.

"Fortunately no one was injured at the time," Langner says, just as he maintains he was lucky to recover what he did to support the insurance claim. But he knows he won't be that lucky next time. He simply won't have to be. As a result of the lessons learned since, Langner is leaving nothing in the hands of chance. **GCI**

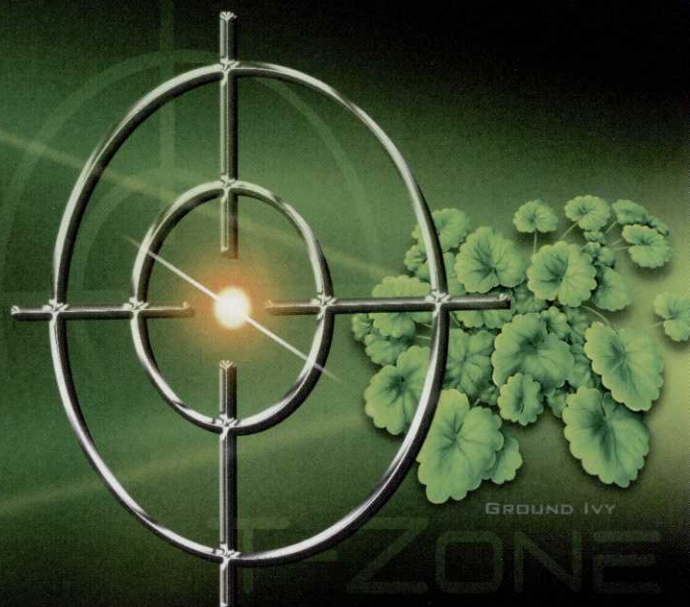
Trent Bouts is a Greer, S.C.-based writer and a frequent contributor to GCI.



I'd encourage everyone to take one day during winter and sit down with your team and lay it all out. Do you have protocols? What's your plan if you suddenly lost it all?

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