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A case for wetting agents

by Paul Turcotte

Superintendent,
LeJeune Municipal GC, Miami, Fla.

I've been superintendent at LeJeune for eight years, and have been using wetting agents for the last six. The main reason that I started using them (I've tried several, experiencing both burn and continued run-off) was because of water standing on several greens up to 24 hours during periods of heavy downpours. Even with aerification, we couldn't seem to get the water off. (And some days we averaged four inches of rain.) As a result, the greens were sloppy and unfit for play.

Now, within ½ to 1 hour we can put the players back on the green. During heavy showers, I've gone out and sprayed the wetting agent on the standing water to speed up water penetration and get the greens in playing shape.

Plain water just doesn't do the job here. And, this is not a private course where individual attention to watering problems can be handled by adapting course renovation and watering practices.

My job is to grow and hold grass that has terrific wear and tear and compaction due to constant play

365 days a year. Here are some of the values of using wetting agents that I've experienced at LeJeune.

1. We haven't syringed during the day since we started using the agents. We used to syringe a couple of times a day to keep the grass from wilting.

2. We haven't had to restore or sod our tees. Before, we couldn't seem to keep grass on the tees because of the compaction. Aerification was a help, but in winter, with the heavy play, we couldn't aerify when we wanted to. All work had to be done at night.

3. We water 50 per cent less. (We have manual heads on greens, fairways and tees and use less water and less labor.)

4. During the winter months, wear around the cups was very bad. We often changed our cups twice a day. With the wetting agents, the Bermuda is deeper rooted, has established itself and is now in a healthier growing condition during that time. (I've found Bermuda roots down two feet—no rooting problem. In the hottest weather, we notice no discoloration in replacement of cups—and cups are changed daily).

5. I now have very little wash-out in the traps.

Of course the immediate question that came to my mind before I started using the agent was just how much more it will raise my budget. The representative from the company that I now use said it not only wouldn't cost me more, but that it would reduce my expenses.

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Some of the disadvantages

An argument is only valid when both sides of the story are told. GOLFDOM's columnist, Dr. James Beard, who believes not enough detailed research has been done on wetting agents, revealed these disadvantages about them.

1. Some can cause temporary greens burn.

2. Some people believe there is deterioration of soil as a result of continued use.

3. They are tools that can be used in a turf management program, but not as a regular practice such as every week. This is so because their main function is temporary alleviation. Thus, if you use them to correct something, you have to continue to use them as a corrective; your original problem will always remain. So, their best use is on temporary problems such as localized dry spots or on a thatch condition where its dried out and you can't get water to the spot.

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Wetting Agents

Continued from page 68

To illustrate as he did: My cost for the agent is approximately \$900 a year (for 100 gallons). The cost of this is paid for several times over when you consider that I am reducing the amount of water I use, the electricity involved and the labor. Plus, there is the advantage of better greens.

Naturally, the location and size of a course makes every situation's needs different. So, he gave me another example. In another city, a superintendent at a public course recommended a wetting agent program. This would cost approximately \$1,400 to \$1,800. He was able to point out that the wetting agents would keep the dew off the greens for three day periods. This reduction in labor alone, he figured out, would cover three-fourths of the cost of the wetting agents.

We still get compaction, but here again, the wetting agent eliminates this. I've aerified and

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worked more organic matter into some areas; almost pure sand to help hold the Bermuda, mostly on the collars.

In the early part of this year, we had eight weeks of hot, dry, 20-mile-an-hour winds. I continued to saturate my bunkers and greens, using 1½ quarts of wetting agent in 200 gallons of water, if they showed signs of dryness. My soil kept loose and the water would penetrate without running off. (In a wet period it keeps the water moving through.) I've applied my wetting agent, Aqua-gro, when the temperature was 35° or 95° without experiencing any burn.

Our fairways are fertilized three times a year at approximately 800 lbs/acre, 40 per cent being organic. During the winter months we use a liquid fertilizer on the greens approximately every two weeks. We include the wetting agent to give more uniform color, and when the color goes out there is no splotch.

Continued on page 103

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Wetting agents

Continued from page 101

In summer, the temperature averages around 85°. Every time the spray tank goes out on the course, we put 1½ quarts of wetting agent in it. This gives me better control and gets the fungicide down to the roots. (The topdressing is a sterilized mix of 70 per cent sand and 30 per cent heavy muck or marle).

To give you an example of the real extreme weather we sometimes experience, this past February we had a complete white frost with temperatures in the 30°-31° range. (In general, it was a cool month with very heavy dews.) However, knowing the frost was coming, I saturated the greens with a wetting agent because our Bermuda grass, especially 328, has a tendency to turn black. I boosted my application rate to 2½ quarts in 200 gallons of water (for approximately 25,000 sq. ft.). The day after there was no frost on the bunkers or greens—and the golfers were able to start right off! □

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