



Know Which Way the Wind Blows

Experts offer advice on how to choose a fee-based weather service

By Frank H. Andorka Jr., Associate Editor

You watch the evening news over dinner to check the weather for the next day. The weather geek predicts a 30 percent chance of rain throughout the day with high winds. You scan the Internet's free services such as The Weather Channel or AccuWeather, and they predict a 20 percent chance of rain in the morning. So who's giving you the right information, and what should you do to prepare your course for the coming day?

It's Maalox moments like these that make you happy you've paid for a weather service to provide you detailed information for your course's microclimate. Having professionals analyze the weather for you can help you finalize decisions about what to do to your course the next day. But as budgets increasingly constrain what superintendents can spend, they must decide what essential elements a service must provide.

Customized service

"Most superintendents could teach a Meteorology 101 class, so they don't need general information," says Sara Croke, president of Weather or Not (www.weatherornot.com), a Shawnee, Kan.-based weather service. "They need detailed information about the next few hours, not a five-day forecast from the National Weather Service."

But Croke says superintendents who de-

Continued on page 40

MIKE KLEMM

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Continued from page 38

pend solely on their own interpretation of maps could easily run into trouble.

"No one should be allowed to read weather radar until they can read a satellite image," Croke says. "If you misinterpret the data, you can damage your course."

Eric Johnson, former superintendent at Spyglass GC in Pebble Beach, Calif., says he purchased a satellite-based system that worked well — until the "storm that ate Spyglass" struck. In six hours on Feb. 2, 1998, Spyglass absorbed 4.5 inches of rain. The amount of rain surprised him, and Johnson believes his service should have alerted him about it before it hit.

"We knew there was going to be a storm, but we had no idea we were going to get that rain," Johnson says. "We got good general information, but when you're facing the kind of destructive storm that we faced that day, it would have been more helpful if we could have received detailed forecasts."

When storms hit in the future, Johnson says he'll find a service that can give him customized information. "If they can't help me during those situations, then they're no use to me," Johnson says of weather services.

One-on-one service

Croke says it's important for meteorologists to talk with superintendents whenever superintendents need to talk to them. If meteorologists can't work with a superintendent's schedule, the information may not arrive in time to help.

"Superintendents should expect one-on-

one conversations with a service meteorologist," Croke says. "After all, they are paying someone to help them. They should receive forecasts specific to their courses and should have someone at their service devoted to keeping those forecasts current."

Don Wilmes, turf industry manager of the Data Transmission Network (www.dtn.com), says his company's site is designed to allow superintendents to use only those sections they need, rather than force feeding them information they don't.

"We want our site to be as user-friendly as possible," he says. "We want superintendents to control what information they receive."

Don't be afraid to ask weather services for references and then check them, Croke says.

"Superintendents aren't shy about letting people know what they think," she adds. "If they don't feel like they're being well served by a service, they'll let you know."

More information, the better

Wilmes says services should offer more information than weather. DTN, supplied over a satellite-link system, also provides material-safety data sheets with its service, allowing superintendents to plan chemical applications more effectively. It also provides superintendents with a searchable chemical and pest database.

"Superintendents apply expensive chemicals to their courses, and if a service can provide information that will prevent the application of those chemicals at a time when they're

Continued on page 50

Cost Containment

Sara Croke, president of Weather or Not, a Shawnee, Kan.-based weather service provider, knows most superintendents must watch costs in today's highly competitive golf market. So how does she expect a superintendent convince owners to pour money into a weather service? Point out that the information collected is useful to other members of the staff, not just superintendents.

"You're not the only one who can use this service," Croke says. "There are other members of a club's staff to whom this information will also be helpful."

Croke suggests superintendents dis-

cuss the possibility of sharing the costs with other departments to defray the overall price of the service. This serves the dual goal of getting superintendents the information they need without breaking their budgets.

"Don't forget that people like the pro and the banquet manager could also use this kind of information," Croke says. "How brilliant will the club look if it saves a bride from having her reception rained out because it's sharing detailed weather information? That kind of value-added service helps everyone."

Club professionals can maximize the number of rounds on the course if they

have accurate weather data. More rounds means more money, and a swelling bottom line is always a good way to convince owners to invest, Croke says.

If costs are spread over several departments, they are less likely to raise red flags for bookkeepers. But make sure that the weather service you choose can get everyone the information individually.

"Superintendents don't want to be responsible for getting the information to all the different departments," Croke says. "They want to make sure everyone is getting the proper information themselves so superintendents can do what they enjoy most — taking care of their courses."

Money Shot

Continued from page 48

"In the winter, when the course is off its peak water use, we divert the water normally used for irrigation, put it through a filter and pump it to recharge wells to contribute to the drinking water supply," Davis says.

Come again? The golf course adds water to the drinking supply?

"There are outsiders who don't understand the water issues in the golf industry," Davis contends. "They just think we use insane amounts of water and never put any back."

The golfer education process will also focus on some of the Sanctuary's management practices. For instance, if a fairway is ravaged by insects, Davis and his staff may leave it alone and try to contain the damage — abiding by Audubon's philosophy — before even thinking of using an insecticide.



With the help of signage, golfers will get the idea that the Sanctuary is about preserving the environment.

Davis and crew also don't fertilize as often as other area courses. Davis realizes that some golfers may flip out upon seeing a patch of brown grass, and they may not understand why everything isn't lush green. But he offers no apologies and vows that the Sanctuary will provide putting greens as good as any course in the valley.

"The biggest misconception that golfers have today is that all golf courses have to be green or they're not good," Davis insists.

Davis believes the Sanctuary can help change that thinking.

He believes golfers will feel good about playing a course that cares about the well-being of wildlife and wildflowers. ■

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Know Which Way

Continued from page 40

least effective, then the service pays for itself," Wilmes says. "We think of ourselves as more than just a weather service. We're an information service."

Counting costs

DTN serves nearly 3,000 U.S. superintendents and costs \$984 annually. Wilmes admits the price is steep, but the cost is usually a small price to pay for the insurance it brings to superintendents, he adds. "What the service will save you in labor costs and misused chemicals will pay for the service easily over a year," Wilmes says.

Weather or Not's prices start at \$450 per month for its Premiere consulting package, and courses can opt to use the service for a minimum of six months. Also, Weather or Not has an event fee of \$175 per day, with service starting the day before the event.

System flexibility

With all the technology available, superintendents should be able to get the

information in the form they want.

"You have to decide which delivery system — Internet, pager, satellite or fax — is going to work best for you," Croke says. "That's also going to narrow the field some because not all services are capable of delivering information the way you need it delivered."

Still, some superintendents are skeptical that the services are worth the costs, especially to clubs with smaller budgets. Chris Thuer, superintendent at Frankfort CC in Frankfort, Ind., uses the Internet when he needs weather information. He

subscribed to a service for years, but he figured his return on investment wasn't high enough to continue paying the nearly \$1,000 per year for the service, especially when he can depend on the 'Net.

"I can't understand why anyone would pay for a service when you have so many free options on the Web," Thuer says. "For those of us running limited-budget clubs, paying money for a service can be prohibitive."

But that doesn't mean Thuer has ruled out buying a service in the future. Thuer says that if he could find a service that gave him evapotranspiration rates and disease forecasting — data he really needs — then he'd certainly subscribe.

Despite the advantages of weather services, Croke also warns against becoming too dependent on technology



Some superintendents turn to the Web for free weather information in the form of easy-to-understand symbols.

to warn of an emergency. Sometimes looking up at the sky will tell you all you need to know.

"We've become such a 'click-here' society that sometimes we forget technology is by no means fail-safe," Croke says. "Superintendents can never throw out common sense because they are some of the most sensible people I know. Believe your eyes. No service in the world will ever replace that." ■