Refined Forecasts Foretell Fine Future

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.

Pest forecasting has always been an inexact science. With a dearth of accurate pest-predictive models, you might consider employing the local medium from the carnival to tell you when grubs will attack your course.

Before you hire Madame Pomfrey and her crystal ball to predict your pest problems, however, may I offer you an alternative? Try the Turf Pest Outlooks Web site (*www.turf-pestoutlooks.com)*, developed in partnership between Syngenta's Golf Division and the Pest Forecasting Group, a Warrenton, Va.-based group that develops proprietary pest forecasting formulas.

While other Web sites use similar technology to predict regional pest outbreaks, this site offers superintendents opportunities to receive pest warnings across the country.

"We used to distribute pest warnings in our newsletters that we sent out to our customers," says Joe DiPaola, Syngenta's golf market manager. "Two years ago, we decided we wanted to start putting the information on the Web. The Pest Forecasting Group contacted us, and we formed a partnership."

The Pest Forecasting Group creates its predictions after gathering weather data for a specific area at two-week intervals. Then it plugs those conditions into formulas to determine when conditions are ripe for any number of pest problems.

Right now, the list of diseases the group tracks including brown patch, dollar spot, gray leaf spot, pythium blight and summer patch. The group also tracks insect threats so you can zap them before they destroy your turf.

When you log onto the site, you see general reports about current pest problems, broken down by region. Then you can drill down for more detailed reports to isolate specific microclimates in your state.

Since the site has weather data from the past 30 years for your area, you can compare current conditions to those during past pest infestations. Armed with that information, you can be on the lookout for problems before they strike.

DiPaola emphasizes that the site isn't meant to diagnose disease on specific courses. Instead, it gives superintendents a

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welcome weapon in their ongoing battles with diseases and insects.

What an amazing tool it will be if the predictions turn out to be fairly accurate. Wouldn't you love to have a heads up when weather conditions in your area might promote gray leaf spot? Wouldn't you love to know when white grubs may be creeping their way on to your course *before* they decimate it? Those kinds of predictions are what Turf Pest Outlooks is designed to make.

It's not a perfect site, but if Syngenta and its partner continue to refine it, the site is sure to be a success — and more accurate than tarot cards at predicting pest outbreaks.

The system is constantly being refined, DiPaola says. The site needs to include predictions that account for irrigated turf, and DiPaola says he wants the site to expand the list of pests it tracks.

On the advice of superintendents, Syngenta and the Pest Forecasting Group will also tweak the time their site is updated. DiPaola says the partnership discovered that it was updating the site too late for superintendents to make optimum use of the information they received. The partnership will rectify the problem by the spring.

"This is an evolving science we're dealing with," Dipaola says. "It's a journey we're still taking, but we're excited about the start we've made. As we continue to refine it, we hope to make it even more useful for superintendents."

So before you spend $20 the next time the carnival is in town, try Turf Pest Outlooks first. Madame Pomfrey doesn't need the extra cash.

Frank H. Andorka Jr., managing editor of Golfdom, can be reached at 440-891-2708 or fandorka@advanstar.com.