

Of Salmon and Superintendents

The issue of water and water rights in western Washington is as hot as any issue out there, and it's not going away anytime soon **BY RON FURLONG**



When grilling salmon, it's best cooked on the barbecue with a few alder sticks smoking in the coals. Avoid a gas grill if you can. A little lemon on top of the salmon and maybe a thin swipe of butter across one side (but not too much) is ideal. No seasoning is required. You don't want to kill the flavor.

Since I developed a sudden and very depressing allergic reaction to any shellfish about five years ago, my appreciation of salmon has grown immensely. So living here in the Pacific Northwest is a good place to be to appreciate this nonshellfish. I resemble a brown bear in that salmon have become a staple of my diet.

But the downside to these wonderful-tasting salmon is their habitat here in western Washington, and how that relates to my job as a superintendent. I love eating them, but trying to justify my need to irrigate the golf course to some of the more radical fish huggers — and the organizations the fish huggers have stuck into their back pockets — can be as frustrating as a downhill putt at Shinnecock Hills.

The issue of water and water rights in western Washington is as hot as any out there. It's been brewing for a few years and is not going away anytime soon. Salmon are just one facet of the issue — which is extremely complex and, dare I say it, convoluted.

Each golf course, although they may share some of the same problems and restrictions as their neighbors, has its own circumstances when it comes to water rights. Many facets are involved in determining each separate issue, such as:

- Do you draw from a well? If so, how deep is your well?
- Does water removal from your well affect any nearby streams or rivers?
- Do you have a stream or river running through the golf course?
- Are there salmon on your property?
- What is the exact hydrology of your watershed? Which watershed are you in?
- How much water is your course permitted to draw each year? Is that sufficient in a drought year? If not, what do you do?
- What is your relationship between surface and ground water?
- Do you conserve?
- Do you *really* conserve?
- Who was the 15th president?

If I closed my eyes and concentrated really hard, I could probably add about 20 more questions to that list, but you get the point. The gist of the argument is this: There are competing interests for the water in Washington, which include:

- fish and wildlife preservation and enhancement;
- recreation;
- municipal and industrial uses; and
- agriculture and hydropower.

The problem many golf courses face is that the first item on that list — fish and wildlife preservation and enhancement — has taken such a prominent and often radically substantial role in many groups' and individuals' minds that nothing else on the list seems to matter to them.



PHOTODISC

There has to be a common ground found that can keep a vital resource like golf courses and an equally as vital resource as salmon both happy.

Salmon have been around for tens of millions of years. Their lifecycle is rather complex when compared with most fish. They hatch in freshwater from eggs laid in the gravel beds of streams. Then they migrate downstream, eventually making it to the sea. They may spend years in the ocean, traveling thousands of miles. When salmon have matured, they make their way back to the freshwater streams where they were born. There they spawn and die soon after.

In 1998, lawmakers passed the Watershed Planning Act here, which is framed around watersheds or subwatersheds known as Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIA). Forty-two of Washington's 62 WRIs are represented by 33 planning units engaged in watershed planning at some level. The goal is to develop a more thorough and cooperative method of determining the current water situation in each water-resource inventory area of the state and to provide local citizens with the maximum possible input concerning their goals and objectives.

A central element of planning under the Watershed Planning Act is an assessment of how much water is available and how much is being used and or needed in the watershed.

If the assessment indicates there is sufficient water for in-stream uses and there is additional water available for desired growth, then the state's Department of

Ecology uses that information as part of the basis for making water-rights permit decisions for growth. Among its other functions, the Department of Ecology is the state agency responsible for preserving and protecting water quality and administering the water-rights permit system.

In a report to the legislature from March 2003, the Department of Ecology warns: "Statewide monitoring and information systems should not be limited to activities centered on salmon recovery. Rather, these efforts should address a broad range of water-resource information, including demographic growth, land use, water rights and water uses."

My own situation here in western Washington is a fairly common one, but still has its own distinct variables that set it apart from anyone else's exact situation. The golf course of which I work, Avalon Golf Club, lies on the southern end of a watershed known as the Samish Watershed in Skagit County. I draw from a well that feeds the pond from which we pump water.

Ever since the golf course opened in 1991, Avalon has been allocated to draw up to 78 acre-feet of water per year from the well. We are now being told this number will be reduced, greatly reduced — perhaps by four times. It has been suggested, although never proven, that drawing from our well affects the nearby Samish River.

Avalon believes strongly of the possibility that there may be no hydraulic connection between the well and the river. Withdrawals from the well more than likely have no impact on the river at all. But we have now been told not to draw from our well when the river is at a certain low level, which is published daily on a state-run Web site. Of course, the times when we need to draw the most water are exactly the times the river is at a level when they don't want us to.

During a very dry 2003, I would not have been able to water the golf course from June through August. It's kind of a Catch-22 for the course. We can have 78-acre feet of water, but it would be great if we could use it in the rainy season of winter. Agghh!

From October through April, western Washington does live up to its reputation for a lot of rain and cool weather. However, May through September can be very dry, and the average rainfall we experience will surprise some. Check out some of the eyebrow-raising average annual rainfalls for a few cities around the country compared to Seattle, which receives 38 inches of rain:

- Chicago, 38 inches;
- Washington D.C., 41 inches;
- New York, 42 inches;
- New Orleans, 57 inches; and
- Miami, 63 inches.

Continued on page 44

Of Salmon and Superintendents

Continued from page 43

In 2003, our rainfall total on the golf course was 36.5 inches (Avalon is about one hour north of Seattle). Only 4.25 inches of that total fell from May through September. That's only a little more than 19 percent of the entire year's rainfall in five months. This sounds even more impressive when you state that nearly 90 percent of our rain fell during the winter months (January through April and October through December).

It almost goes without saying what a key ingredient water conservation becomes in all of this. Audubon International gives this view of water conservation: "To ensure adequate water supplies not only for irrigation, but also for the healthy ecological functioning of water bodies, such as rivers, streams, wetlands, lakes and ponds." It further states, "Water conservation and water-quality management are critical for ensuring adequate irrigation supplies, without taxing or degrading vital water sources."

State policies and laws need to balance the allocation of water for the different uses to support the economic vitality of cities and towns while being sensitive to long-standing legal water rights. But on the other end — the superintendent's end — there are some things that can be done to help lessen the consumption of water. They are:

- constructing more ponds and thus creating a larger holding capacity for the precious resource;
- deepening ponds;
- building more native areas on the course that don't need irrigation;
- using effluent water;
- implementing better irrigation systems and practices; and
- finally, not just joining an organization like Audubon International, but making it a part of your course's everyday management arsenal.

There has to be a common ground found that can keep a vital resource like

golf courses and an equally vital resource as salmon both happy. It just takes a little common sense from all involved.

On the golf courses' end, it's to ensure that every possible method of conservation is being used. On the salmon's end, it's making sure realistic requirements are set.

By the way, I forgot to mention not to overcook the salmon. With fillets, don't cook more than 10 minutes, and don't flip them. Just close the top of the grill and smoke the dickens out of them. The steaks may take a little longer, and you'll want to hit both sides about eight minutes each.

It's hard to go wrong with any choice of wine, but I'll go ahead and recommend a good Riesling.

Enjoy. ■

Furlong, superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Burlington, Wash., can be reached at rf7500@aol.com.



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