

# Budget Blight

Although soaring gas prices will certainly affect the bottom line in 2006, it's pythium right now that's sapping the coffers throughout much of the country

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR

**D**etermined to keep their budgets balanced, superintendents are weathering the sky-high fuel prices this year. What's making them sweat, especially in the eastern half of the country, are the balanced dew points.

On too many mornings this summer, superintendents have gotten up on the wrong side of the heat index. When temperatures rocketed in June, July and early August, the dew points were never far behind. That type of humidity triggered disease — especially pythium — and necessitated control measures that tend to bust budgets as well as blight.

"I would wake up in the morning and the temperature was 74 degrees and the dew point was 74 degrees," Rick Slattery, the superintendent at Locust Hill Country Club, outside Rochester, N.Y., says. "When you get that kind of weather persistently, the disease pressure has really, really been heavy."

The chemical tabs have been just as profound, especially at transition-zone courses, where pythium can blow up overnight when the soil warms. Slattery is spending \$200 per acre to treat his greens and tees with Terrazole and \$174 per acre to treat his fairways and first cut of rough with Subdue Maxx.

"I'm going to assume that probably everybody is going to have trouble staying within their fungicide budgets this year," Slattery says.

Most superintendents have no choice; the alternative is dead turf and unhappy players. In Slattery's case, he's had to make three wall-to-wall applications against pythium in addition to an extra two broad-spectrum fungicide applications.

"I've been (at Locust Hill) 11 years, and I've been a superintendent for 35 years, and I haven't had this kind of problem in my career," he says.

Compounding matters, rainfall, which often dictates spray schedules, has been unpredictable. Reliable storm fronts have rarely appeared; instead, isolated shower cells have come and gone without warning. Too often an unexpected drenching has washed away a recently applied agent.

"Usually you get 21 days of control with most of the fungicides, but I'm noticing I'm getting seven, eight or nine days of control and then disease pressure again," Slattery says. "So I'm not only applying more fungicides because we're getting a lot of disease, I'm not even getting the length of control out of the products."

Slattery's annual pesticide budget, which also covers dollar spot, brown patch and anthracnose, is around \$32,000. About one-sixth of that total is dedicated to pythium control, although that allotment accounts for only spot applications or one full application to the greens, tees and fairways. As of Aug. 8, he was expecting to spend closer to \$45,000 on pesticides this year.

"We're probably a good \$10,000 to \$12,000 over budget with just pythium control, and we'll probably be another \$4,000 to \$5,000 over with other products because I'm not getting the length of control that I normally get," Slattery says. "That's a lot of money. And I know a lot of supers that are stressed out over that."

Slattery empathizes with the superintendent who doesn't enjoy a large budget or management team that is willing to bend financially in order to save the turf.

"We just had a greens committee meeting, and its basic approach was obviously they don't want dead grass on the course for any reason," Slattery says. "Some golf courses don't have that choice. They just don't have \$15,000 or \$20,000 extra to put into fungicide. They don't really have any choice at all but to hope things get better with the weather."

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**Pythium blight has run rampant across courses in much of the United States, thanks to high humidity.**

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Scott Brickley has a slightly smaller budget — \$419,000, including wages. But the superintendent at Bunker Hill Golf Course, a public facility in Medina, Ohio, also has an owner, Todd Ingraham, who fully grasps the “pay me now or pay me later” dictum when it comes to erasing disease.

Were Brickley to leave his course untreated in favor of the budget, he says he would essentially be adhering to the “old public course theory” — keep the greens and tees in the best shape possible and ignore the fairways. But in turn, the fairways would likely die and have to be reseeded and fertilized.

“Now you’ve got a whole other handful of expenses that are going to affect your budget,” Brickley says.

So they’ve forsaken the budget at Bunker Hill and attacked the pythium from tee to green every 10 to 14 days. Through July, the course’s annual fungicide budget — much like Slattery’s — was \$12,000 over, with 90 percent of that overrun specific to pythium control, Brickley says.

“I just stated to Todd that it’s all about pythium out there. So you gotta do it. You gotta protect yourself,” Brickley says.

At Rainier Golf and Country Club in Seattle, superintendent Sam Sprague enjoys many of the same luxuries afforded to Slattery, including a total budget of \$865,000 and an understanding membership. Through June it was irrelevant that he had slightly overspent on fuel (\$700), chemicals (\$1,500) and fertilization (\$5,000).

“The members are happy, and that’s the bottom line,” he says. “As long as my overall budget isn’t too out of whack, they don’t concern themselves about the categories unless there are special issues.”

Gas isn’t one of those issues, even if it is headline news across the country. Sprague’s fuel allotment is \$15,000, or less than 2 percent of his total budget. “It’s not a huge budget category,” he says.

In addition, the effects of higher fuel prices have been delayed at many courses because of early-order programs. In those cases, fertilizer — comprised largely of natural gas — had been ordered two or three months before fuel costs started to rise in January.

“Buying your fertilizer in November or December and having it delivered in the spring gives you two advantages,” Slattery says. “You’re taking advantage of last year’s prices, and you have (the fertilizer) on site and don’t have to wait for delivery. And a third advantage is you get little bit of a price reduction because you’re buying it in bulk.”

Of course, whatever hazards were postponed this year will eventually surface. And as 2006 budgets start to take shape this month,

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LOCUST HILL CC

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even the most happy-go-lucky superintendent will have to think twice about rising costs.

At Locust Hill, Slattery's primary concern entering his Nov. 1 fiscal new year is replacing his irrigation system. The cost of plastic pipe — another byproduct of natural gas — has dramatically risen. The market is so volatile, Slattery says, that irrigation installers will guarantee their prices for no more than 10 to 15 days.

"All the experts I talked to said they don't think prices will ever come back down, even if petroleum does drop in price," Slattery says. "Once it goes up there, it stays up there."

As he had done with fertilizer last year, Slattery plans to pre-order irrigation pipe in bulk as soon as he receives the final design of his new system. The manufacturer will store the pipe until Slattery is ready to begin the project. The same goes for copper wire, another product that has become more expensive this year.

"If you know when you're going to use it and how much you're going to use, purchase it now," Slattery says.

With this year's price hikes in mind, most superintendents will seek bigger budgets for 2006. John Miller, the certified superintendent at municipally operated The Golf Club at Yankee Trace, in Centerville, Ohio, anticipates a slight increase, especially with rounds up at his course this year.

"Business has been good," he says. "In a worst-case scenario, we'll maintain status quo. But in reality, with the cost of fuel going up and potentially fertilizer going up, too, status quo would be like getting cut."

Sprague, in his fifth year at Rainier, will make his annual request for more staff. Unfortunately, fulfilling that proposal would necessitate extra dues from members, so the prospects of a bigger crew remain in doubt. "But we haven't been asked to decrease crew size," Sprague optimistically notes.

Good communication, according to Slat-

tery, is vital in requesting budget increases. "You have to be able to talk to (management) and explain to them the situation in a way they can understand it," he says. "As long as they know up front, things go a lot smoother."

If corners need be cut — either this year or next — there are plenty of ways to do so.

The first area Miller looks at — "unfortunately," he notes — is labor. And while employees are rarely let go because of budget constraints, their overtime hours are always susceptible.

"(Labor) seems to be the area where we typically have a little bit of flexibility," Miller says. "If we happen to be blessed enough to catch

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## Fuel Costs Already Difficult for Some to Ignore

The inflated gas prices of 2005 are anything but an afterthought at Bunker Hill Golf Course in Medina, Ohio.

"As far as budget numbers are concerned, the two biggest factors for me are definitely gasoline and fungicide," superintendent Scott Brickley says. "Everything else is status quo, if not below."

Beginning with regular gas — including that which is used for the course's golf cars — Brickley is exceeding the monthly budget by an average of \$400. In April, May and June, he spent \$1,121, \$1,196 and \$1,702, respectively.

The monthly budget for premium gas has also gone over budget by about \$200; for example, from \$700 to \$933 in April. And the diesel budget is "just unbelievable," Brickley says. "We are \$600 to \$700 over every month."

Thus far, Brickley hasn't been asked to make any cuts, outside of limiting the only three applicable workers to no more than three hours of overtime per week.

— By Thomas Skernivitz





When it comes to budget woes this year, “it’s all about pythium,” says Scott Brickley, the superintendent at Bunker Hill Golf Course in Medina, Ohio.

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CERTIFIED SUPERINTENDENT,  
THE GOLF CLUB AT YANKEE TRACE

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a rainy day, and we can’t really be productive, we’re looking to send some of our laborers home.”

Miller also rations his chemicals, if necessary. He’ll skip a spray if possible and rely instead on integrated pest management (IPM) strategies. “What we’re trying to do is stretch (the chemicals) a little bit, maybe

even into next year,” he says.

Sprague, meanwhile, has been able to spend more on fertilizer, largely because machinery upgrades in recent years have parlayed into fewer repair bills. “Last year we had some major breakdowns, and we kind of based our (2005) budgeting on history,” he says. “But it’s kind of unpredictable. You can get hit by a couple of big costly parts and get right back to where you guessed you’d be.”

Like Sprague, Slattery doesn’t want to skimp on fertilizer, regardless of how expensive it gets. He’d just as soon downgrade a tree-pruning program, reduce overtime or hire one less employee.

“Even when I was at golf courses with very small budgets, I may not have asked for more money in my budget, but I refused to drop my line items for fertilizer,” he says.

Anything less from superintendents, even in the midst of this summer’s pythium epidemic, would mean going down without a fight for their turf.

“We’re playing against Mother Nature, and we hope that we win six out of 10 times,” Brickley says. “But the other four times she just kicks our [behinds].” ■