Are You Letting Up on the Gas?

BY LARRY AYLWARD

NOW IS THE TIME TO CUT BACK ON FUEL CONSUMPTION

The talk at the water cooler these days is about Tiger. Not Tiger Woods. The Exxon Mobil mascot named Tiger.

That happens when the news of the day is record-high fuel prices and, oh, by the way, the announcement that Exxon Mobil reported the highest corporate profit in U.S. history: $10.71 billion for the fourth quarter of 2005 and $36.13 billion for the year.

It's not that my co-workers and I don't care what Tiger shot over the weekend. It's just that we're worried about what it's going to cost us to drive back and forth to work for the week. I know you're worried, too, and not just for personal reasons (I pity you if you drive a Dodge Ram). You're worried about the impact that escalating fuel prices will have on your golf course's operation.

If your course attracts primarily middle-income golfers, you're concerned those players will play less this summer because they have to pay more to BP, Shell and Exxon Mobil to get around town. When energy prices go up, spending on entertainment — dinner and a movie, a baseball game, a round of golf — goes down. Some consumers can't afford these pastimes. And while others can afford them, they're still convinced they must cut back on their spending because gas has reached a daunting $3 a gallon. As one consumer analyst pointed out recently, "The $3 price is a psychological barrier."

With plenty of mower and utility vehicle gas tanks to fill, superintendents have definite concerns about rising fuel costs. They're also slapping their foreheads in angst when they get the bills for the loads of topdressing that were delivered to their maintenance facilities. It's not the price of the material that has their eyeballs popping; it's the delivery charges because of high fuel prices.

In April, President Bush finally addressed the fuel price issue with some grit. Bush ordered an investigation into whether oil companies are manipulating prices. Democrats are looking into the matter, too. I like Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid's (D-Nevada) proposition that suspends for 60 days the tax of 18.4 cents per gallon on gasoline and 24.4 cents a gallon on diesel. The plan would cost $6 billion, which Democrats said should be covered by increasing taxes on oil companies. I also like the new energy legislation plan recently announced by Reid and U.S. Rep. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio). Their Clean EDGE Act (EDGE stands for Energy Development for a Growing Economy) calls for the government to reduce petroleum consumption by 20 percent in five years and by 40 percent by 2020.

All of this is well and good, but we must do our part as well. Much of the political talk, after all, is rhetoric. For instance, for all of Bush's tough talk, Republican leaders showed no action when they had the chance to get tough with the oil companies. In April they backed off provisions to boost taxes on oil company profits.

The fuel crisis is now, tomorrow and the next day. That's why golf industry personnel, from superintendents to general managers to owners, must do their part and implement ways to cut back on fuel consumption *now*. Prices will drop if Americans use less fuel and supplies increase (at least that's what economic experts say.) This will bestow consumers with more cash to play golf, among other things. It will also not drain superintendents' maintenance budgets.

Superintendents should analyze the possibility of using more plant growth regulators on their courses' fairways to cut back on mowing to save fuel. They should also examine if their courses' greens really need to be double cut every day.

And how is this for crazy thinking: Is it possible for mowers to be converted to run on used vegetable oil from a club's restaurant?

Superintendents have also said that more fuel-efficient equipment will help them in their plight to deal with increased fuel costs. Are equipment suppliers looking into this matter sufficiently?

Like you, I have plenty to worry about without having to add high fuel prices to the list. And I'd like to get back to talking about Tiger at the water cooler. Tiger Woods, that is.