

Club Corp's Doug Miller knows his company's superintendents can decrease pesticide spending just by managing turf properly.

On History or a Hunch?

Superintendents discuss their strategies to budget for pest management

BY ANTHONY PIOPPi
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

In his role as vice president of golf course management for Club Corp., Doug Miller knows that correctly managing the pesticide budgets at the company's 160 golf courses can save thousands of dollars. But he is also aware that skimping on chemicals and applications can be devastating to the turf and, therefore, the quality of the golf course. He says the key to this business equation is to trust the individual superintendents to do their jobs.

"A lot of our guys have been at the facilities a lot of years," Miller says.

Through their experiences they know the weather patterns, the signs of impending disease outbreaks and the timing needed for preemptive applications. Club Corp. superintendents also have the added advantage of

having five regional agronomists behind them. Miller, though, says he and the agronomists know not to meddle, letting individual superintendents make decisions.

"We do not dictate plans; we try not to micromanage," he says. "We try to hire good guys who know what they are doing."

Sometimes, the superintendents Club Corp. hires can reduce expenses just by managing the turf properly, thereby reducing pesticide applications. In one such example, water use at a desert course was reduced \$10,000 per four-week period.

Mike Brower has been the certified superintendent at Minnesota Valley Country Club in Minneapolis for seven years. In that time, his pesticide budget has remained at \$53,000 per year, an immense source of pride

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Many superintendents are thinking of dollar spot (top) and brown patch when they consider how much to allot for fungicides in their pesticide budgets. Mike Brower, certified superintendent of Minnesota Valley Country Club, says application timing and using the correct product is vital to the process. "If you don't, you're only wasting time and money," he says.

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for Brower. He has been able to do this through a combination of coming to know the intricacies of his golf course, how to apply his products efficiently and maintaining the healthiest turf he can. He also uses some generic products, which has led to a reduction in cost over the years.

At his previous course, Hillcrest Golf Club in St. Paul, Minn., Brower was superintendent at a layout where members wanted conditions like Minnesota Valley but with a budget that was 40 percent less at the time. At Hillcrest, Brower says he learned to maximize the dollars he had to fight diseases, such as snow mold. Applications for that problem alone consumed 20 percent of his annual budget. Although he admits he has enough money to handle any disease issue, he remains vigilant in his spending.

"They key is timing and using the correct products," he says. "If you don't, you're only wasting time and money."

By "correct products," Brower means the most efficient chemistry.

"The key thing is knowing what products are out there and knowing what they can do," he says. "I pride myself in knowing what is out there. I teach my assistants to try and learn as much as they can about pesticides."

Brower points out there are plenty of people who will give a superintendent advice on what to use but it is best for a superintendent to find out for himself.

"You can't leave the decisions up to the salespeople," he says.

For Paul Veshi, superintendent at the semi-private Dudley (Mass.) Hill Golf Course, his budget does not provide for enough pesticides to combat all of his ills. An anthracnose outbreak in late August last year sent him to the green committee looking for an additional \$600 to pay for an immediate application.

Veshi, who is in his 10th season at the nine-hole course, says he uses the knowledge he has acquired in his time there to help determine his budget, which is focused on protecting the putting surfaces while, at times, the fairways suffer.

"We do everything we can to get a comprehensive program on the greens," he says. "We

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can deal with a little dollar spot on fairways.”

Knowing what has happened in recent years does not always prove to be a good indicator of the present. In 2004, for example, the heat index in that part of central Massachusetts hit 115 degrees Fahrenheit, and summer patch made its presence known on a much larger scale than usual. This year, in

spite of the anthracnose, the summer has not dealt any adverse unexpected conditions; cool nights have helped the cause.

“Our best employee is the weather,” Veshi says with a chuckle.

His advice to those who are hit with the unexpected pathogen is to be confident enough to ask for additional funds to help combat the problem, something he says he was hesitant to do at prior jobs.

“I wasn’t smart enough to ask for more money,” he adds.

At Old Memorial Golf Club in Tampa, Fla., certified superintendent Trent Inman says he has never had to go back and ask for more money at the private golf course since he budgets for a worst-case scenario when it comes to disease. Inman was at the 36-hole Royce Brook Golf Club in New Jersey prior to Old Memorial and says that job was more difficult because of the “fluctuation in disease pressure,” based on weather conditions. In Tampa, he is virtually guaranteed to have the same conditions day in and day out.

“You plan on having hot, ugly weather,” Inman says.

At his old club, a series of nights where temperatures never dipped below 75 degrees was cause for concern.

“Here you get 75-degree nights every night,” Inman says about Tampa.

His biggest problem is nematodes and he uses a fumigant applied directly into the soil using a slit process performed by an outside contractor. There is no re-entry on the course for the following 24 hours. Applications are usually made every two or three years at a cost of about \$25,000 per 18-hole course.

Inman acknowledges that having plenty of money allows him to combat his weeds and pests in a way most superintendents can’t.

“The more money you have to play with, you don’t have to be as precise,” he says.

For the seven courses in the Parish of East Baton Rouge, La., there is no such luxury, according to Buddy Gautreau, senior golf course superintendent and assistant director of the golf department of the park and recreation commission. The organization is a not-for-profit, and courses can only spend what is taken in.

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"If the revenues don't cover the expenditures, then we have a problem," he says.

Now in his third season, Gautreau was superintendent at Santa Maria Golf Club when the parish purchased it. He continued to run it and another before taking on his new position. Since then he has spent a good deal of time learn-

ing about the parish's five other layouts, which helps him develop the budgets for each course.

Working off the historic needs of the courses and the local knowledge of the individual superintendents helps him to plan. If more money is spent than budgeted, he can put in an additional request.

"We can go back," he says, "but I don't think we ever have."

If he does need an increase, the process gets a bit complicated. His first stop is the golf division. If there is no money there, then he moves up the ladder to the park and recreation department to search for funds.

According to Gautreau, one of the biggest problems in his area is the sudden rain storms that roll through, making timing of application very important. He says it is not uncommon for an entire pesticide application to be wiped away.

"Down here we say, 'You can't count on it to rain, and you can't count on it not to rain,'" he says. ■

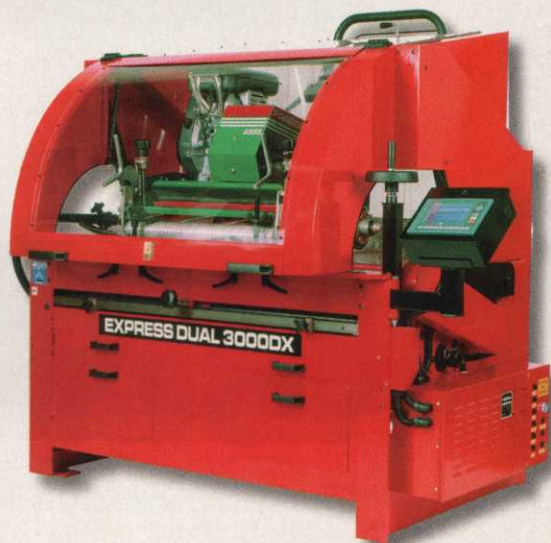
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