

Shades Of Green

■ OPINION

There's a nip in the air here at the Lake Omigosh Golf Club in central Florida, but it's not as cold as the economy.

Our superintendent Duffy McDuffy is learning how to maintain the course with five fewer crew members, thanks to an economy that went from bedrock to quicksand during this past fall. Leaves weren't the only things in red that were falling in September and October.

And the fairways and roughs aren't so dark green anymore. They're more often greenish-yellow thanks to high fertilizer costs and budget cuts. Some club members still don't understand why things have changed. There will be less overseeding this year thanks to the fear of watering restrictions and the economy.

Greens and tees are still being overseeded in central Florida and through the transition zone to prevent wearing out the dormant or semi-dormant bermudagrass. But further south in the semi-tropics, they hope the winter is another mild one so they can skate through with no major cold spells to send the turfgrass an off-color. Members just can't seem to adjust to the color purple in Florida.

It's a tough spot for a lot of superintendents who must cut staff and somehow try to get the same amount of work done. Some senior superintendents find themselves on the chopping block and being replaced by those making smaller salaries. Longevity and loyalty become expendable as the club ponders shrinking income and rising costs.

The ripple effect of the economic meltdown obviously is being felt far and wide. After valiantly trying to overcome the stigma of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath and helping out New Orleans, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America faces a very real possibility of a downturn in attendance as tightening purse strings strangle travel budgets for superintendents. Hopefully, a post-election rebound will be enough to propel GIS attendance. However, I don't think this will be a record-setting year.

I've heard comments from superintendents who are revamping their fertility programs and switching to less-expensive products to save

Get Ready For Some Big Changes

BY JOEL JACKSON



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money, and others are converting to biodiesel for some of their mowing equipment. When the going gets tough, the tough adapt and survive the best they can.

It seems obvious to me that our industry is headed for some of its biggest changes in recent memory. Turf management is going to be different very soon. I'm not preaching gloom and doom, but we will need to be more creative to meet expectations.

Between water availability, conservation, water-quality issues and irrigation technology, we will be required to show more water savings than ever before, and we should expect some of that forced conservation to be written into new permits and permit-renewal language.

We are losing the battle with the Environmental Protection Agency on soil fumigants and other products. And while I want to remain cautiously optimistic, I think the days of preserving certified turfgrass varieties are on the way out. We will plant new grasses into unfumigated ground and try to grow in new or renovated courses in competition with the indigenous weed/grass seed bank, disease spores, insect larvae and nematodes.

There will be less incentive to switch to new grasses requiring fewer inputs if the prospect of contaminated turf is the outcome. We will likely end up having to use more fertilizers, water and conventional pesticides in the grow-in process and run a greater risk of runoff and leaching. That's ironic because the Environmental "Protection" Agency is forcing the issue.

The days of a pristine monostand of turfgrass may well be over, and that will be a change that will take golfers some time getting used to.

Certified superintendent Joel Jackson is executive director of the Florida GCSA.