



# Undoing Overseeding

As several courses prove, cutting back on the agronomic technique equates to reducing water use. But at what cost? **BY ANTHONY PIOPPi, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

**W**hen the discussion came up at Marriott Golf concerning two properties in southern Florida that had long been overseeded in the winter, it was decided there didn't seem to be a good reason to continue the practice of carpeting the course in green during the season.

"We couldn't make a business case or an environmental case that we needed to overseed," says David Robinson, the company's director of golf grounds.

Marriott decided to buck the trend and bet that golfers playing the Grande Lakes and Grande Pines courses in Orlando wouldn't mind. "We decided to take that gamble," Robinson adds.

The estimated savings at Grande Pines alone was more than \$110,000, including a revenue increase realized by not having to shut down the course for overseeding.

Money alone is not the driving force; there is also the subject of water savings. "We certainly take that into account," Robinson says.

He points to 2007 when Naples, Fla., where another Marriott golf property is located, was in a severe drought and the company decided against overseeding the course.

"It wasn't the right thing to do environmentally," Robinson says.

With the growing concerns about water a hot topic in many parts of the country where winter overseeding of bermudagrass golf courses is standard, maintenance of those layouts during the winter months is sure to change. But the problem for many of the courses that would rather not put down the ryegrass is that they are in highly competitive golf vacation areas where green equals gold and a layout that is anything but lush is somehow considered sub par.

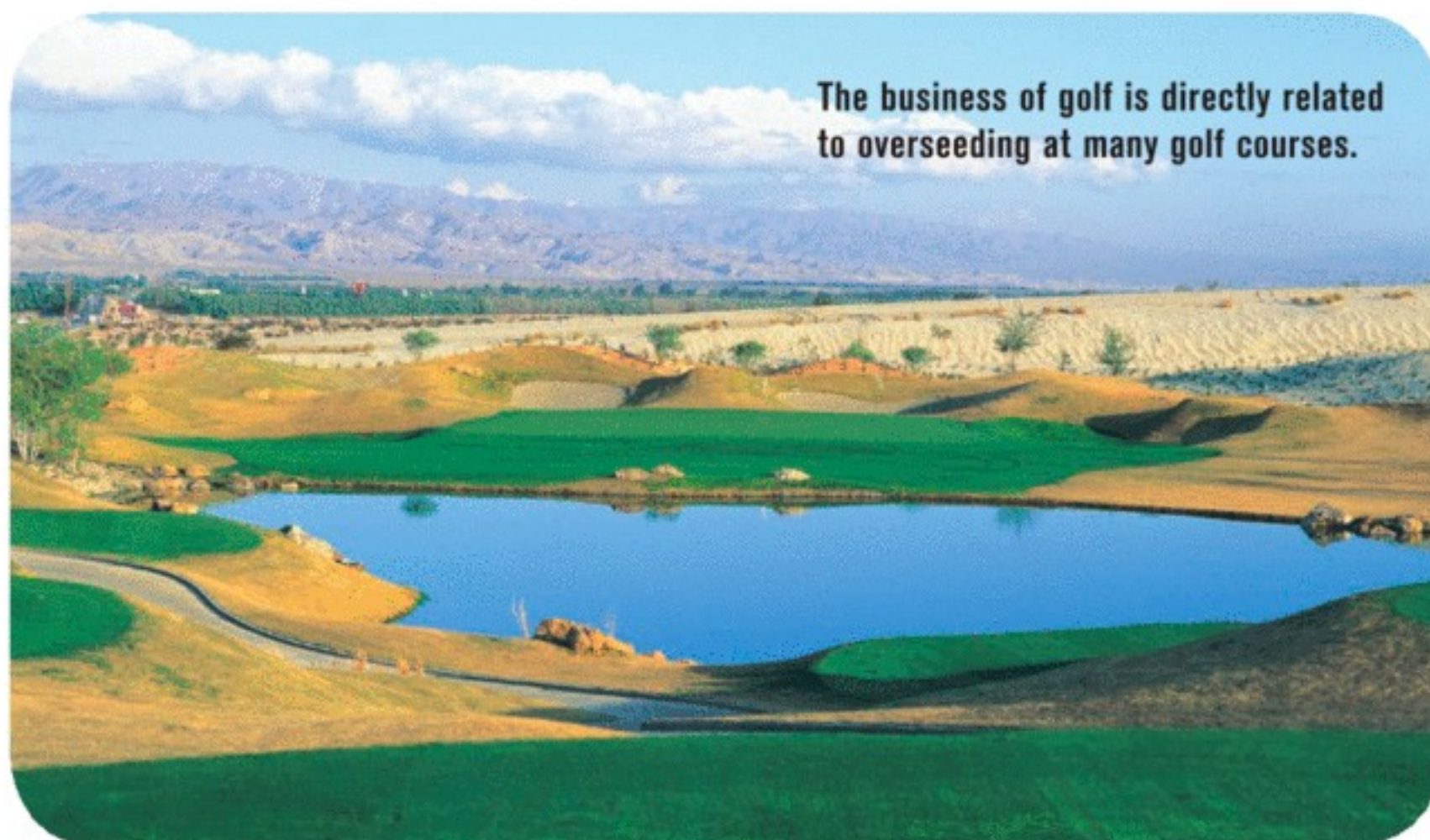
Mike Huck is a former agronomist for the United States Golf Association's Green Section who now runs his own consulting firm, Irrigation and Turfgrass Services, in

Dana Point, Calif. Huck says while many courses are aware of the water problems and would like to reduce their usage, foregoing overseeding is out of the question. He points to places like Palm Springs and the Arizona areas of Phoenix and Scottsdale, where the golf industry relies on the business of winter snowbirds to survive. Fearful that those players would bypass turfgrass that doesn't radiate a deep emerald hue for one that does, courses overseed specifically to entice and retain that clientele.

"If they don't make it then," Huck says of the courses and their winter business, "then they don't make it."

Even many private courses are of the same mindset that green is better than

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The business of golf is directly related to overseeding at many golf courses.



## WATER WISE

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brown. For instance, at the 27-hole North Ranch Country Club in Westlake Village, Calif., Director of Agronomy Rich Wagner is finally making progress to have overseeding of the course reduced.

He convinced the green committee to cut back on the process this year, but then the board of directors overturned the decision. In 2009, however, the fairways will no longer be overseeded, just the rough — which has a shade problem and does better in the winter with overseeding — and the surrounds of the bentgrass greens. Wagner estimates that his annual price tag of \$450,000 for water could be halved with the decision.

At Tucson Country Club, the membership has decided against overseeding this

year. Of the 75 percent of members who responded to the question of whether the practice should continue, 75 percent said no, according to new Superintendent Tim Vondra.

The main reason for the change is the loss of golf during the two transition seasons. The course would be closed for a week in the fall and for at least two weeks in the spring. "It's a choice they've made to have better golf all year round," Vondra says of the decision.

This year's overseeding will skip fairways but include approaches, collars and tee tops, a necessity to prevent wear in many instances. Reducing water usage also played a role in the decision. According to Vondra, appearances in the water-taxed area of the country are important.

"We're not just a private club not doing anything; we care," Vondra says.

Tucson Country Club is the only course in that area that does not overseed fairways, Vondra says. The water savings was realized immediately. The scaled-back overseeding took place in September and, by early November, Vondra estimates he had saved 35 acre feet of water, which translates to more than 11.4 million gallons of water.

The reduction in overseeding also translates to members leaving for greener courses. "We had seasonal members that weren't happy with the decision and have gone to other places," Vondra says.

The problem is how players view the surface on which they play. "The thing we still deal with is people's perception that

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dormant bermudagrass is dead,” Vondra says. “It has a [negative] connotation.”

On the other side of the country in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., Superintendent Sean Donahue has reduced overseeding at Tidewater Golf Course and Plantation thanks, in part, to a change in the management company that runs the facility. Donahue says when Troon Golf was in charge, he was putting down 800 pounds to 900 pounds of seed per acre per season. When the local company Burroughs and Chapin Golf Management took over, Donahue was allowed to reduce the output to 400 pounds. It was down to 325 pounds per acre last year, and he’s hoping for another cutback this season.

Donahue likes the move because the smaller rate requires less irrigation, which

is helpful since the course has low-quality water. “The less we water, the better we will be in our soils,” he says.

Marriott deals with the same problem with The Rookery at Marco in Naples, Fla. “The water quality is poor and in winter time we’re not getting the summer flushing rains,” Robinson says. “It’s difficult to maintain quality turf.”

Unfortunately, Marriott believes it can’t change its agronomic practices. “To stay competitive in that market, we need to overseed,” Robinson says.

In the near future, it may be out of the hands of courses and management companies as to whether overseeding occurs. Huck says a series of dry winters in the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada Mountains are a cause for alarm. The wa-

ters of the Sacramento Delta Region, which feed much of the fresh water to Southern California, are down significantly. The state has already forced a cutback in the water that can be drawn from that source and further tightening is expected to protect the damaged ecosystem in the delta.

Huck says voluntary cutbacks are in place, “but they’ll become mandatory if we don’t have good, rainy winters.”

The key to saving water is educating golfers as to why overseeding entire layouts is unnecessary and, even more important, will not deter their enjoyment of the game, Vondra says.

“I would argue that dormant bermudagrass is a better surface from a golfer’s perspective,” he says. “We can market that to people and they’ll understand.” ■

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