

# Letting Up on the

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Superintendents search for ways to conserve energy and money in their maintenance budgets

**BY ANTHONY PIOPPI**  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**A**s sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, so will gas and diesel prices. That is not good news for the golf course industry, which finds itself in a prolonged period of stagnation with fewer new participants coming to the game.

What's the relationship between fuel prices and golf rounds? The answer is simple: money.

In 2005, a *Golfdom* survey found that

7 percent of responding superintendents said the price of gas would cause players to cut back on playing golf. At the time, the national cost for a gallon was \$2.10. A year later, when gas was \$3 a gallon, 20 percent responded there would be a detrimental effect. Now, with gas expected to hit \$4 a gallon this summer, it's safe to say that the percentage of superintendents concerned about people playing less golf will rise even higher.

Of course, fewer rounds means less

revenue, which will be paired with higher operating costs as the shipping price for fertilizers rise, as do such costs for every item shipped to a course from cocktail napkins to bed knives. For low-budget golf

“Energy Conservation and Pollution Prevention Opportunities.” According to McCleary, being green isn’t just about being friendly to the environment; it’s also about saving money.

McCleary said the most prevalent practice is the reduction of mowing frequency, especially on fairways. But he noted there are other ways to save energy and save money that can offset fuel-price increases. For instance, courses that heat maintenance buildings with portable natural gas heaters can purchase thermostats to regulate temperature — an easy way to save, especially in areas of buildings that can go unoccupied for a length of time. He also pointed out that energy-saving light bulbs can make a significant difference.

Another fuel-saving measure has been for courses to take areas that receive little or no play out of the mowing rotation and let large swatches return to natural areas that are mowed once or twice a year.

For some superintendents, such as Brian Ramsey, reducing mowing is not a viable option. Ramsey is at Ojai Valley Inn and Spa in Ventura, Calif., where he says the overall experience for the golfer means sensational conditions every day. Ramsey said reducing mowing would probably save the resort, which grossed somewhere near \$60 million in 2007, about \$9,000 a year.

Ramsey pointed out that Ojai does not push through as many rounds as possible, opting to make sure golfers have a relaxing experience. In 2007 there were about 38,000 rounds

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### Going Electric

Will you consider using more electric equipment to offset fuel costs?

YES, more than ever	13%
NO, I'll never make the switch	23%
I'm considering it	65%

Source: Golfdom survey, 638 readers

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courses or ones working on small profit margins, financial problems could be just around the corner. Invariably, it will be the maintenance line of a golf course’s budget that will have to be reduced.

The fuel spike has caught the industry off guard, said Brian Melka, Jacobsen’s director of product management. The most common phrase he hears during meetings with superintendents is, “I never budgeted for this.”

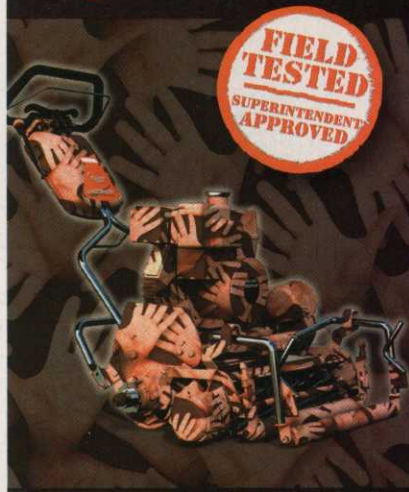
“Nobody prepared for how high gas prices have gone and that they’ve stayed up this long,” Melka said.

According to Melka, conserving fuel is now a topic of priority in the golf maintenance industry. More superintendents are asking about the availability of electric and alternate-fuel mowers.

“We thought we were going to have to do pushing [on this matter], and we’re getting a tremendous amount of pull,” Melka said.

The topic is getting more publicity at trade shows lately. At the New England Turfgrass Foundation Conference and Trade Show held in early March, Joseph McCleary, certified superintendent of Saddle Rock Golf Course in Aurora, Colo., and Caitlin Rood of Tetra Tech EM in Denver presented,

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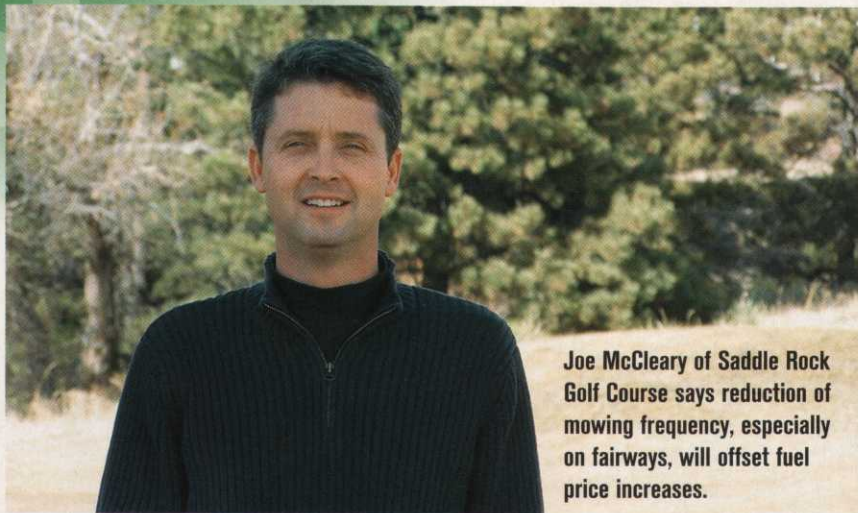
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## Letting Up on the Gas



Joe McCleary of Saddle Rock Golf Course says reduction of mowing frequency, especially on fairways, will offset fuel price increases.

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played. He said it would be easy to accommodate close to 45,000 rounds.

"It will have an effect on us," Ramsey said of the spike in oil prices. "But it's not the end of the world."

However, Ojai Inn and Spa, as an organization, is cutting back on fuel consumption as part of an effort to reduce the resort's carbon footprint.

While the cost of fuel will not affect the maintenance of the layout, Ramsey speculates there will be an impact felt by the overall resort as more of a family's dollar is used up from higher prices at the pump and on everyday goods such as food. That

**The cost of gasoline in 2007 was 60 percent higher than in 2004.**

will mean less disposable income to spend on such luxuries as resort vacations.

For some, such as John Motycka, the thinking is that a higher cost of living may be a benefit to certain golf courses. Motycka is the owner/superintendent of Skungamaug River Golf Course in Coventry, Conn., a family-owned, built and

operated daily-fee 18-hole layout near the University of Connecticut. He said it is possible that his course and others like it might see an upswing in rounds as golfers opt for local layouts to save gas and play less-expensive courses.

"It could be balanced. People who are close may want to come here," Motycka said.

Skungamaug's weekend rate is \$36 for 18 holes without a golf car, but that may rise by a dollar for the 2008 season to offset the cost of fuel, the first price hike in years. The course has gas golf cars.

According to Motycka, the fuel expense in 2004 was 8 percent of his maintenance budget. It rose to 12 percent in 2007. The cost of gasoline in 2007 was 60 percent higher than it was in 2004. Motycka mows fairways three times and greens six times weekly, usually with a triplex in combination with handmowers for the cleanup passes on the small putting surfaces. He said he can't reduce his mowing.

But after two dismal seasons because of wet weather, rounds were up at Skungamaug and other courses throughout the region last year thanks to a drier summer. Motycka said that golf as a whole might be on its way back up.

"I have a feeling we may have already hit the bottom," he said.

That's good news, no matter what the price for a gallon of gas. ■

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