



Getting Out the Word

Led by superintendents, the golf industry must change its image from water wasters to responsible irrigators

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

It doesn't matter if Mark Jarrell is in a deep sleep or his body begs him not to rise from his bed at 3 a.m. If a thunderstorm awakens Jarrell in the middle of the night, he will get up, put on some clothes and make the short drive to the maintenance facility to shut off his golf course's irrigation system. The last thing Jarrell wants to do is squander water on his golf course, the Palm Beach National Golf and Coun-

try Club in Lake Worth, Fla., where he is the certified superintendent.

"I'll drag my butt out of bed to come over and turn it off," Jarrell says.

Nobody would know if Jarrell elected to stay in bed. But he would know, and it would bother Jarrell if he didn't do the right thing.

Jarrell realizes that the freshwater supply is dwindling in this world, and he wants to do his part to conserve what is now being called a "precious commodity."

Jarrell is not alone. Not only do most golf course superintendents believe that it's environmentally wrong to waste water, they also know that applying too much is not good for the health of their golf courses or their maintenance budgets.

Ironically, just as nobody knows that superintendents like Jarrell will get out of bed to turn off the water in the middle of the night, few people outside the golf industry realize that superintendents strive to be responsible water users. In fact, many non-golfers believe that golf courses just turn on the sprinklers and let them run, not caring how much water they use as long as their courses are lush, thick and vibrant green.

"We're just too visible," Jarrell says.

Superintendents are bothered by the water-wasting perception, and they

realize it's time to fight the stigma. But what can they do? And where should they start to convey the message that most golf courses and their superintendents use water wisely?

There are several avenues to pursue to communicate the message. But superintendents believe that getting out the message should not fall squarely on their shoulders. They say they need help from their professional peers — including owners, pros and general managers at the local, regional and national levels — to spread the word.

Shawn Emerson, director of agronomy at the Desert Mountain Club in Scottsdale, Ariz., believes people in the golf industry shied away from talking about water use in the past because they didn't want to bring up the issue for fear of being attacked by environmental groups. But now it's time to step up the message. "I think we need to be a little aggressive," Emerson adds.

And the message needs to be consistent — that is, superintendents, owners and pros need to be on the same page, says Greg Lyman, director of environmental programs for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. "[The message] also needs to be communicated to many different segments of our community — golfers, non-golfers, legislators and environmental advocacy groups," Lyman adds.

Plenty to say

Superintendents have a variety of material to communicate their message that they are efficient irrigators. It's just a matter of organizing that material and executing a plan.

Mark Esoda, certified superintendent for the Atlanta Country Club, says it's high time that superintendents step up to execute that plan.

"Superintendents are really good at the group hug and patting themselves on the back," Esoda says. "But we're not good at standing up and saying, 'Do you know what? We were green before green was even popular.'"

Esoda is doing his part to get out the message. Thanks in part to him, superintendents are considered irrigation experts in Georgia. Esoda spearheaded an effort by the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association to enact Best Management Practices for irrigation, a move that has benefitted the golf industry's image statewide. It wasn't an easy task and it took several years to accomplish, but 246 of the 256 Georgia GCSA member properties stepped up to participate in surveys that documented their water use and irrigation-reduction practices.

Participating golf courses disclosed how they effectively used irrigation systems, new grass varieties, wetting agents and plant growth regulators to use less water. They also documented

their usage patterns and areas where they decreased irrigation during the 2007 drought, including how they discontinued the practice of overseeding to save water resources.

The Georgia GCSA partnered with the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (GEPD) in the project, and their relationship has blossomed into one of respect. So much so that during the 2007 drought throughout the Southeast, Georgia superintendents were given leeway during a level-four water restriction. The GEPD knew enough about superintendents and their irrigation practices to realize that superintendents would use water as sparingly as possible.

"[The GEPD] has realized we were not the water abuser they thought we were," Esoda says.

Word of the Georgia GCSA's effort made it to the mainstream media. Under the headline, "Water Conservation Par for the Course," The Atlanta Journal-

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Mark Jarrell is one of many superintendents bothered by the water-wasting label.



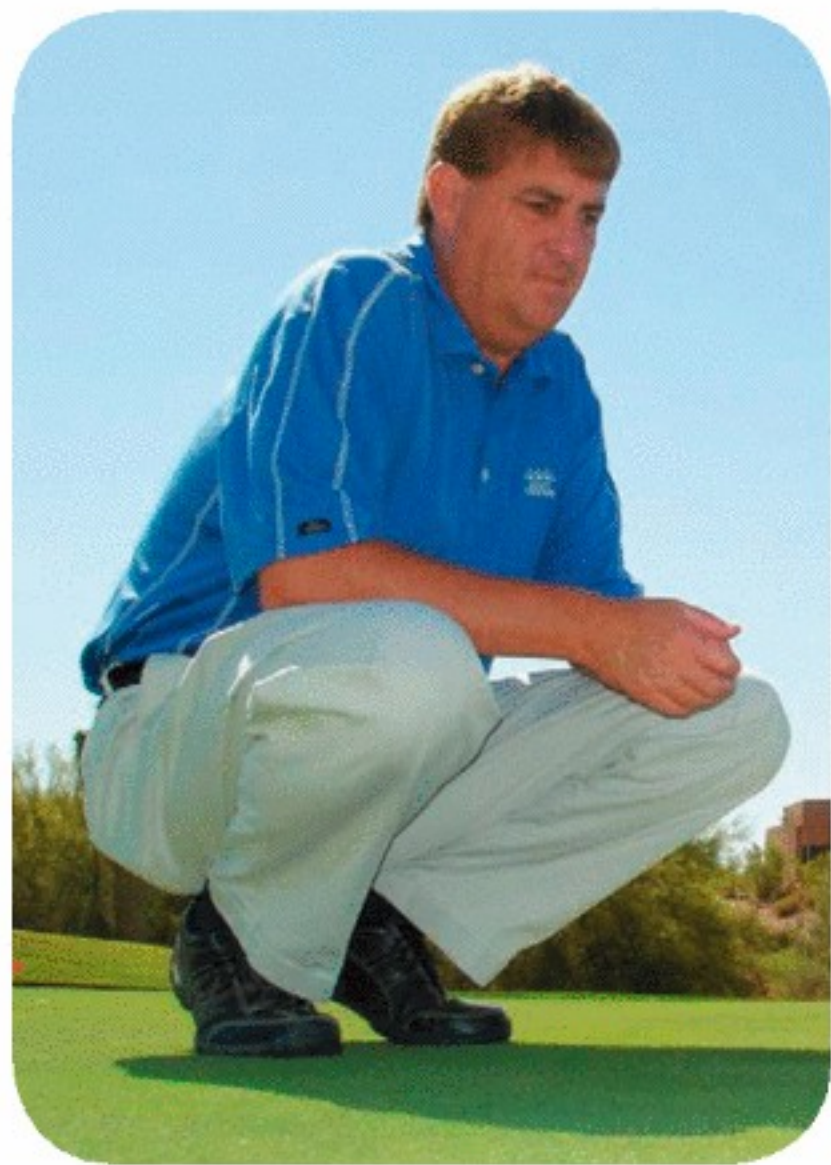
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Constitution reported on the Georgia GCSA receiving a commendation from the governor for the organization's water conservation efforts.

Esoda and the Georgia GCSA continue to take their message to the public. Esoda says the Georgia GCSA is telling its story to water councils, environmentalists and the general public.

"We're targeting them with a public relations campaign," he says. "We want to bring them out to golf courses to show them that we don't waste resources like water."

Esoda says the association also wants to hire a public relations firm in Georgia to create "a fun and edgy message." The Georgia GCSA also plans a Georgia Golf Saves Water Day next year to promote golf courses as efficient water users.



Superintendents shied away from talking about water use in the past, says Shawn Emerson, director of agronomy at the Desert Mountain Club. They can't afford to be shy now.

“The mainstream media in Southern California has printed more stories about more golf courses using reclaimed water for irrigation, which has helped educate the public.”

Lyman says the Georgia GCSA has created a meaningful best management practice document for other chapter associations to adopt. "It's a fantastic template for all of us to follow . . . and should be energizing to other states," he adds.

Other golf courses have solid environmental stories to tell about their water use. For instance, the Broken Sound Club in Boca Raton, Fla., is implementing a massive \$13.5 million reclaimed water project, paid for by the city. For years, the city of Boca Raton has been dumping about 6 million gallons of treated wastewater into the ocean, which has been a waste of money and resources, says Joe Hubbard, the club's director of golf course maintenance. Much of that water will now be directed to Broken Sound and used for golf course irrigation, among other things.

"This means we won't be pulling water out of the aquifer anymore," Hubbard says. It also means the golf course is using wastewater that was previously dumped on the ocean's coral reefs. "The environmentalists should love that," Hubbard adds.

In parched Southern California, regulatory agencies have newfound

respect for superintendents as wise water users, says David Davis, an irrigation consultant based in Crestline, Calif., and immediate past president of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants. But superintendents have helped their own cause by educating regulatory officials about golf course irrigation, Davis adds, noting that those same officials are also participating in educational sessions at various conferences to learn about golf course irrigation.

The mainstream media in Southern California has printed with stories about more golf courses using reclaimed water for irrigation, which has helped educate the public about their water use, Davis notes.

"Superintendents are like farmers — they won't use any more fresh water than they have to because it comes out of the profit picture," Davis says.

Going local

If the message of superintendents as responsible water users is going to be successful, it must be pitched at the local level, says Chuck Green, director of golf operations at Sage Valley Country Club in Graniteville, S.C.

Going local with the message means that superintendents are at the forefront of communicating it, Green says. They could do this locally by holding media days at their courses or making presentations at local government meetings.

"People will listen to you more if you're right there with them," Green says.

Green likes the idea of a media day, where reporters can talk to "the people who are pulling the trigger on letting the water fly," he says. But depending on which medium they're addressing, superintendents would have to make their message succinct. For instance, that message would have to be brief



Time for Superintendents to Get Out in Front of This Topic

The mainstream media loves to haul out the dirty laundry. But newspapers, magazines, television and radio enjoy stories that offers "good" news, too.

Considering the environment is a hot topic these days, golf course superintendents would be wise to get on the offensive in regard to the topic to tell their stories about the "good" environmental initiatives they're doing at their courses. Watering wisely is under that category.

Maybe this means these superintendents should make presentations about their irrigation tendencies at city council meetings, which reporters often cover, to get the word out that they're not wasting water.

Maybe it means they should invite the press to their courses for a media day. They can provide the press with lunch, offer everyone a polo shirt and tell them how watchful they are not to over-irrigate for the sake of their communities and the environment.

It's time these superintendents step forward and dispute the public's assumption that all golf courses waste water.

— Larry Aylward

and to the point if a superintendent was speaking to a radio reporter. But a superintendent could speak more in-depth about water use if a newspaper or magazine reporter was interviewing him or her.

Lyman suggests that four or five courses within a local chapter unite for a media event to discuss the proactive approach they take collectively to irrigate efficiently.

"If we can just peel back a couple layers of the onion and show people what we have and how we operate, I think they would be amazed at the level of technology and control we have with irrigation systems, especially when you compare that to other irrigators, such as home lawn systems," Lyman says.

The first group of people to be targeted locally should be the people with the power to regulate the resource, says Mike Hughes, executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association. "I would hone a very tight message to them to show a couple of things: one,

that we don't waste resources; and two, that there's a tremendous societal benefit from the use of the resource in a golf context," he says.

Regarding the latter, industry people agree golf courses also need to send the message that the water they use is for good reason — to provide recreation and generate revenue to local economies. The golf industry, after all, is a \$65 billion industry.

Hughes predicts there will be heavy competition between freshwater users in the future and that golf courses must prove their worth to get their due.

"How do we best position ourselves to win the competition for the resource?" Hughes asks. "We have to work with the regulators and the legislators and educate them so they understand the issue and understand how golf works in that context."

Whether it's a local or national message, Lyman says superintendents can use new GCSAA data that proves superintendents are responsible irrigators. In its report, "Golf Course Water Use and Conservation Study," the GCSAA reports that golf courses use about 1.5 percent of all fresh water dedicated to irrigation nationally. Golf courses use 0.5 percent of total fresh water consumed.

The NGCOA also recently issued a special report entitled, "Troubled Waters: Golf's Future in a Thirsty World," that urges golf courses to act proactively in face of the freshwater shortage.

"We conducted the study because we think golf is a little vulnerable in this issue," Hughes says. "We needed to shore up our position."

Hughes says some golf course owners have been slow to realize the issue's importance. "Like a lot of things in life, unless it's something that's biting at your heels right now, it's something you can easily put in the background and not think about too much," he says.

The PGA factor

Earlier this year at the Golf Industry Show in Orlando, professional golfer Greg Norman told reporters that the PGA Tour could help educate people about golf and its role in the environment during its television broadcasts. In fact, Norman, who is a board member and the past chairman of the Environmental Institute for Golf (EIFG), said the EIFG talked to the PGA Tour about having golf television announcers, including Gary McCord and Ian Baker Finch, wax about golf's role in the

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environment during weekend broadcasts. Obviously, this would be an excellent opportunity to get out the message to viewers that superintendents are responsible water users.

"We have to get networks and the mainstream media behind this," Norman says.

Superintendents have an ally in Norman, who says golf courses "get a bad rap" for using too much water. So you can bet he's spreading that message to the right people when he gets the chance.

Sage Valley's Green is all for the PGA Tour helping the cause. Not only can announcers and professional golfers drive home the point that superinten-

dents are responsible with their water use, they can also make the point that a little brown on a golf course from lack of water isn't so bad.

"People listen to what the PGA says," Green adds.

Green also says a PGA Tour player could get involved, possibly through a sponsor, to help superintendents convey the message. Being a superintendent, Green says he would like to believe that people would listen more to a superintendent than a touring professional on this matter. But with no offense to his peers, Green says a pro would be a bigger draw.

Longtime superintendent Cal Roth, vice president of agronomy for the PGA Tour, says he would love to see his employer get more involved in getting out the message. Contrary to what many golfers and non-golfers might believe, Roth says television stations don't direct the PGA Tour to "green up" its courses for televised events.

"I've done hundreds of tournaments, and I've never heard a director or producer come to us and say that we need the golf course greener," he says. "We try to get by with as little water as we can leading up to the tournament."

Roth says he would welcome the opportunity to be a television spokesperson to spread the message that



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“The message that superintendents and golf courses are responsible water users must be more than a one-shot deal. A once-in-every-10-years campaign isn't going to help much.”

Did You Know . . .

1.5%

of all fresh water dedicated to irrigation is used on golf courses.

0.5%

of the nation's total fresh water is used on golf courses.

superintendents are responsible water users. In fact, Roth says he plans to bring up the idea to the PGA Tour's communications department.

"I would look forward to that opportunity," he says. "It would be fantastic."

A prolonging effect

The message that superintendents and golf courses are responsible water users must be more than a one-shot deal. A once-every-10-years campaign isn't going to help much.

Industry people agree the message must be conveyed repeatedly. Rick Slattery, superintendent of Locust Hill Golf Club in Fairport, N.Y., says a recurring message is necessary so it has time to take hold.

"This isn't going to be like flipping on a light switch," he says. "The message has to be repeated and repeated and repeated. That's how you drive home a point."

Only then will it be a point well taken. ■