

I was caught in Europe during the Iceland volcano eruption that brought European air transportation to a halt. I don't expect much sympathy, but I ended up being stranded in Munich, Germany, for a few extra days.

When I returned to Ohio, people asked me what the volcanic ash was like. The ash wasn't visible in Germany. The skies were clear and blue, and the stars shined brightly at night. But the impact the volcanic ash had on the region was socially and economically devastating. People were stranded in foreign countries either on vacation or business and couldn't get home. Airlines were forced to take hundreds of millions of dollars in losses each day. And then there was the ripple effect on other industries.

My experience reminded me of the power of nature. As many golf course superintendents know — on a much smaller scale — there's not much you can do when Mother Nature turns the tables. However, throwing your hands up and saying, "I can't do anything about it," is unacceptable.

How to manage the situation in Europe had a lot to do with gathering data and then communicating the problem and solution to those who were affected. Watching this unfold in Europe, it wasn't hard to see similarities with having to close a golf course because of weather conditions.

During the airspace shutdown, people found most information about the airline cancellations electronically. I was impressed by how many people were checking Web sites, such as the BBC's site, using their smart phones. I was checking every 30 minutes.

There were two episodes that struck me as insightful when it comes to communication. The first was the continual messages from news organization telling viewers/listeners not to go to the airports because of flight cancellations, and then looking on in amazement when people kept showing up at the airports (albeit at a much slower rate).

The second episode occurred in Germany the day prior to most of the German airspace opening. The vice president of Lufthansa

Volcanic Ash & Golf Maintenance

BY KARL DANNEBERGER



THE TWO SUBJECTS

DON'T HAVE MUCH

IN COMMON ... OR

DO THEY?

Airlines was visibly angry at German government officials who were keeping the air space closed or restricted. He basically said the officials were ignoring the data and that flying was safe.

This interview was followed by an interview with a government official who said it was a matter of caution. When asked about the test flights on the previous day, the official said he hadn't had a chance to analyze the data.

As previously mentioned, closing a golf course or restricting golf car usage because of weather conditions is one of the most difficult decisions a golf course superintendent has to make. From the volcano experience, my suggestions would be:

- If the course must be closed, communicate that message as soon as possible and your best guess for how long it will be closed. The communication can be through e-mails, Twitter and Web-site postings along with a written notice at the club. You can also provide electronic updates through the day. For example, "The course is closed but the greens are drying and we'll be open tomorrow if the weather doesn't change. Most likely we will lift and place, but check with the pro shop."

- If possible communicate the criteria used to close the course.

- If golfers show up, it may be because their whole day evolved around the expected golfing round. Find something that may ease their pain — free coffee, breakfast or maybe a putting lesson on the pro shop floor. It might be that they have no place else to go.

I know that feeling all too well.

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