From What I See, We Need Change

BY KARL DANNEBERGER

More than 30 years of environmental research funded by the United States Golf Association, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as state and regional turf organizations has determined that golf courses worldwide can have a positive impact on the environment. The story of environmental stewardship by those involved in golf is compelling and a great testament to those involved.

However, public perception does not always follow what is published scientifically or otherwise. In 2002, English golfers and non-golfers were surveyed about their perceptions of golf courses. They were asked the question, "Are golf courses good for the environment?" More than 80 percent of golfers said "yes," while only about 30 percent of non-golfers said the same.

When asked about habitat preservation, golfers cited this as the most beneficial reason for golf courses — that courses preserve natural habitat. But non-golfers said golf courses were detrimental to habitat preservation and could destroy them.

In the United States, given that only one of 10 people plays golf, the industry is attempting to be perceived as more environmentally friendly by publicizing practices to help reduce inputs associated with green turf.

One of the first attempts to incorporate a more environmentally friendly aspect in the United States occurred with Golf Digest's ranking of "America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses 2009/2010." The rankings are based on seven categories, one of which is course condition. Prior ratings asked panelists the question, "How would you rate the playing quality of the tees, fairways and greens on the day you last played the course?" However, the new question or definition for the panelists for the 2009/2010 rankings was, "How firm, fast and rolling were the fairways, and how firm, yet receptive, were the greens on the day you played the course?"

The intent of the definition change was to encourage environmentally sound practices like water conservation by rewarding courses that don't overwater fairways and greens. It was also hoped the new definition would discourage golf courses from overseeding dormant bermudagrass in the winter.

HOW ABOUT A RULE STATING THAT GREEN SPEED CAN'T EXCEED 8 FEET?

When the rankings came out, Augusta National Golf Club moved from third in the previous rankings to first. But, as far as I know, Augusta National is still lush green and overseeds.

Actually, if the golf industry was serious about being perceived as more environmentally friendly — reducing water, chemicals, fertilizer, costs, etc. — it could start by inserting into the rules of golf (in the definitions section?) or maybe under local rules that green speed shouldn't exceed 8 feet, and tees and fairways should be adjusted accordingly.

Outside of regions where water is limited, the most important factor that drives cultural intensity is mowing height. But managing turf under low heights of cut is economically and environmentally costly — and risky. This rule addition would increase mowing heights substantially and reduce the premium put on achieving maximum green speed in an attempt to mimic conditions of major golf championships.

Before you think I am totally crazy, I must admit I really don't like my idea because it levels the playing surface and doesn't reward innovation or excellence. It would most likely promote mediocrity within the superintendent profession.

However, from what I saw from golf courses this year, and from watching the golf's major tournaments, something needs to change.

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