



Under Pressure

With dwindling support from the outside, state turf schools are forced to rethink how they operate.

BY JOHN WALSH

As state governments throughout the country slash spending to solve huge budget shortfalls, some entities, such as school districts, are experiencing sudden, drastic cuts. They're being shocked to the core. Everything states support financially is being scrutinized.

Much like school districts, state universities haven't been able to avoid the knife. For example, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett proposed to cut Penn State University's funding by more than 50 percent. When the dust settled, the school took a hit of 19 percent, to the tune of about \$68 million. Penn State was forced to cut expenses, including a significant reduction in staff, and raised tuition by 3 to 5 percent. In the past 10 years, tuition at the school has increased by 110 percent.

However, the school's robust turfgrass program has been funded steadily, although there have been no increases in the past 10 years, says Peter Landschoot, Ph.D., a professor in the department of crop and soil sciences. The university has been able to grow because of an increase in enrollment and a better record of obtaining grants and private donations, Landschoot says. Reducing funding for higher education has been going on for more than six years in New Jersey, says





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Bruce Clarke, Ph.D., vice-chair of the department of plant biology and pathology at Rutgers University. The university's funding, as a whole, has been cut about 8 percent each year. And the total dollar amount for turfgrass research from the state this year is the same as it was in 1994.

"This year is the first year we're getting the same as we did the previous year," Clarke says. "The bleeding has stopped."

Rutgers also is receiving less grant money from the GCSAA and USGA.

"The GCSAA hasn't had funding for research in two years," Clarke says. "It isn't entertaining new proposals because the economy in New Jersey isn't all that great."

At its high-water mark in 2008, the GCSAA funded (via the Environmental Institute for Golf) \$270,000 to turfgrass research. This year, the GCSAA can only provide \$40,000 to invest in research.

Closing time

An even more extreme example is the closing of the Turf Pathology Diagnostic Laboratory at University of California-River-



State universities are a vital component to the success of many golf courses throughout the nation. Pictured clockwise from top, field days at such schools as Iowa State, North Carolina State, Kansas State and Ohio State help superintendents learn of regional problems and solutions.



side in March after years of state cuts.

"The state is \$30 to \$40 million in debt — we knew we were in bad shape," says Frank Wong, Ph.D., who used to manage the lab. "We'd been suffering for the past few years. The

new governor, Jerry Brown, cut education. The numbers are funny because they change every month. But at the end of the day, there's less state funding for applied turfgrass research."

There's been a steady degradation of state funding in California during the past several years. When Wong first arrived at UC-Riverside, he hired a research technician, which was budgeted at \$50,000. Then the state cut that amount bit by bit, and over nine years, the various cuts equaled the cost of a person.

"That makes it difficult to quantify in the operating budget because it's not immediate," he says.

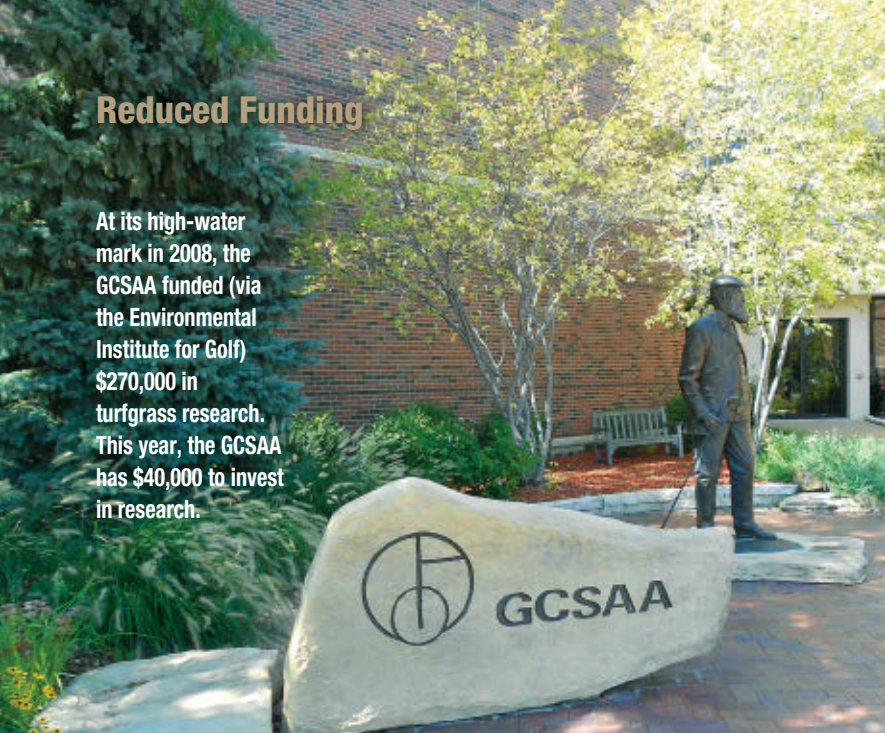
Wong, who has since taken a position with Bayer Environmental Science (see sidebar, page 22), used various funds for the lab in addition to the state's, and when one particular

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Reduced Funding

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of service,” he says. “The market in California for diagnostics differs from the East Coast because disease pressure is less. I’d get 400 to 500 requests a year — and the true cost per sample is \$250.”

Wong says universities need to restructure revenue streams and operate like businesses, which is different than the old days when labs acted as a public service because of state and federal support.

Superintendents in California aren’t happy about not having a local diagnostics resource, Wong says, adding there were large numbers of superintendents who said they’d give him anything he needed to keep the lab open because it represented more than just diagnostics, and there were other superintendents who asked,

“OK, who do I send my samples to now?”

Sending samples out of state to be diagnosed can be done, but it’s not the best option because out-of-state labs don’t know local climates as well as the locals, Wong says.

Wong says, historically, California has been a state that doesn’t have a history of funding comparable to New Jersey,

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source fell apart, everything crumbled. Wong needed at least \$80,000 to keep the program operating. He was receiving \$25,000 from the state and \$40,000 from businesses in the industry, but he still needed to fill a \$40,000 gap.

“You don’t have any flexibility with funding with that kind

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Pennsylvania or Ohio because the relationship between the industry and the university isn't on the same level.

"We've made it work," he says. "My program benefitted from the GCSAA and the Environmental Institute for Golf."

How it operates

Rutgers is somewhat unique because its turfgrass program is built around a breeding program, which started in 1964. Revenue generated from seed — which is licensed to companies because the university doesn't sell directly to superintendents — helps fund the program and research. Additionally, the university receives grants steadily from different sources, Clarke says. Those funds support faculty teaching, extension work and research.



“We’d be in a lot of trouble if we depended solely on state funds. You have to fund your research and beat the bushes for money. I’m not turning down anything right now.” — PETER LANDSCHOOT

"We picked up more technical support that was cut a couple years ago that has to be picked up with a grant," he says. "That's why research grants are important."

The number of undergrads in the Rutgers program has declined for a number of years because of the economic recession and how that's impacted the golf industry.

"But we still have a good number of students and are teaching the same number of classes," Clarke says.

Universities are making a big transition to a more tuition-based business model, Landschoot says, adding that tuition funds professor salaries.

"A lot of universities are phasing out programs that aren't strong, but we're not in that boat," he says. "Our program is very strong. We're a leader."

"Our enrollment has leveled off because of the economy, but the numbers are sustainable," he adds. "That's expected. There hasn't been a sharp decline in numbers. The turfgrass program is one of the stronger programs in the school, and the online program is doing great because fewer people want to come to campus to earn a degree."

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Reduced Funding

Dr. Wong Gets the Girl

Leaving UC Riverside behind and accepting a job with Bayer in Washington, D.C., Frank Wong gets to be with his bride. BY SETH JONES

Editor's note: *This story originally ran as Golfdom's newsletter "Chip Shots." Visit www.golfdom.com to sign up for Golfdom's newsletters.*

It was an easy decision, Frank Wong, Ph.D., laughs, because it involved a woman.

"It was a no-brainer," he giggles. "You get the job that you wanted, in the place that you wanted, and you get the girl too. It's an absolute slam-dunk."

Wong, who previously was a specialist of plant pathology at the University of California-Riverside, accepted a job that moves him across the country to Washington, D.C. He's now a technical service specialist for Bayer's Environmental

Health division. Most important to him, he's closer to his wife of two years, Dr. Caroline Ridley, whom he married in October of 2009. Ridley moved to D.C. after she was awarded a fellowship to work as a scientist for the EPA.

For Bayer, Wong will be doing a lot of what he was already doing as an extension specialist at Riverside — meeting with superintendents and growers and discussing what's best for their turf and crops.

"(Bayer) would like me to focus on providing support for the industry," Wong says. "From D.C. to Boston to Chicago. Where disease pressure on cool season is the

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But Landschoot says the PSU turfgrass program is still stressed. It's looking at efficiencies. Additionally, when someone retires or leaves, those positions aren't being replaced.

"All public institutions are stressed," Landschoot says. "I'm thankful of industry support. All turfgrass students who graduated last year got jobs, so I think students will still come into the program. We need to keep our relationships in the industry strong so we can help students get jobs."

Follow the money

The result of states' funding reductions is putting more pressure on manufacturers and individual golf facilities (owners, superintendents, etc.) to support turfgrass research financially. The gradual erosion of support from states is shifting responsibility to researchers, who have to find support from other sources.

"It's not easy," Clarke says, adding that he's relying more on local associations such as the New Jersey Turfgrass Foundation, the Tri-State Turf Research Foundation and the New Jersey GCSA, and less on national associations such as the GCSAA and USGA.

The PSU research facility, which has a \$100,000 mainte-



Frank Wong, Ph.D., left UC Riverside earlier this year in order to be closer to his wife of two years, Caroline Ridley, Ph.D. Wong is now a technical service specialist for Bayer Environmental Health.

highest — lot of brown patch, lot of dollar spot. It all comes down to enhancing customer service and support. Just talking to sales guys, supers, letting them know the best fit for the Bayer product line.”

If Wong has any regrets, it's that he left behind an area that he feels lacks the support it needs.

UC Riverside had halted operations of its turf diagnostics lab as a result of, among other things, insufficient funding.

“I don't want to make it seem like I was running away from a problem at the university, but, man... when your primary job is to do science and education, and you find yourself 90 percent of the time worrying about budgets, manpower issues, and how to

make sure you have enough paper towels in the lab? It really distracts away from the stuff you want to do,” Wong says.

And then there's the lovely Dr. Ridley. Once this job at Bayer became available, Wong hit the door pretty quickly. But that's what happens when personal lives are involved.

It's obvious that Dr. Wong is a man in love — with a new job, a new city, and most of all with being reunited with his wife. It's almost like the couple gets a second honeymoon.

But how will things go when the two are once again under the same roof?

“Man, I'm still just trying to figure out why she married me in the first place,” Wong laughs.

Details, Frank. You got the girl.

nance budget in addition to salaries, is funded by an endowment from the sale of the Penncross varieties of turfgrass in addition to the royalties from Tee-2-Green sales of PSU varieties. Additional funding comes from Penn State turfgrass council, conferences and industry golf tournaments. There's also grant funding from chemical, seed and fertilizer companies to test products.

“We'd be in a lot of trouble if we depended solely on state funds,” Landschoot says. “You have to fund your research and beat the bushes for money. I'm not turning down anything right now.”

The good news is the economy is starting to turn around, and companies aren't in so much of a holding pattern or downsizing, Landschoot says. Companies want to explore new products.

In Wong's case, other sources of funding were more difficult to come by.

“The golf industry, as a whole, isn't doing well, so how am I supposed to squeeze superintendents for more money when their budgets are being cut? And the chemical companies are fantastic. Without them, my program wouldn't have started. But there's only so much they can contribute, and they're contributing a lot. We need more support from others in the industry.” ■

Walsh is a contributing editor for Golfdom.

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