



THE GRASS ROOTS



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PRIVATE WEATHER CONSULTANTS

By Mike Nelson

One of the most common rules of thumb that a television weather forecaster learns is that "no matter what the current weather is, at least 50% of the public doesn't like it!" How true that is, especially in the summer months in Wisconsin. A forecaster has to be oh so careful to not inject too many personal feelings about heat, cold, rain and drought. Even though farmers (and golf course superintendents) want a good soaking rain, it inevitably occurs the same day as the big golf outing. One misplaced comment from the weather man can make him seem "unsympathetic" to local golfers. This is just one of the occupational hazards in being a TV prognosticator; our normal defense is simply, "we don't make it, we just forecast it!"

Much of the frustration that people feel with weather forecasts comes not necessarily from poorly

times precipitation, or even from inaccurate forecasts — instead I think the problem lies with poor communication. The old adage says, "if you don't like Wisconsin weather now, wait five minutes and it will change." That is true quite often, especially in the warm weather months when a fast moving squall can come and go in just a few minutes.

Because most golfers, pros and course superintendents are not in tune with weather forecasts hour by hour every day, they cannot see the evolution of the forecasts in a 12 to 24 hour period. What they rely on is what they heard at 10:00 last night, or caught on the radio this morning. I can tell you from experience that what was a clear, quiet atmosphere at 10:00 p.m. last night can turn into heavy thunderstorms by 10:00 a.m. the next morning — and it does often enough! One solution for the weather forecaster is to simply include "scattered thunderstorms" in the forecast anytime the temperature gets about 75 degrees and the dewpoint reaches 60 degrees. Unfortunately, that covers almost all of June, July and August — every single day.

People often comment that with all the satellites, computers and billions of dollars we've spent on improving weather forecasting, we should be better than we are. It is doubtful if, even with many times more money, we will ever be able to completely forecast the weather to the extent that I could say "3 days from now it will rain 1/2" between noon and 3 p.m." Our atmosphere is far too complex and fast changing to ever allow such precision.

One area where the technology

has improved, however, is on the shorter range 2 to 12 hour forecasts. In those areas, radar and satellite data can help us pinpoint thunderstorms and more accurately chart their future course. A 6 hour period can be very important for getting through a golf tournament, and a 12 hour period may mean the difference between spraying a certain herbicide or waiting for another day.

"...if you don't like Wisconsin weather now, wait five minutes and it will change."

When I am on television I am not forecasting exclusively for golf course superintendents, nor any other special interest group. Thus, within the confines of the 2 or 3 minutes I am allowed, I am not able to always cover key topics of interest to certain viewers. In addition,

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tion, our TV forecasts are seen over thousands of square miles. It might be raining in the northern part of our coverage area and clear in the south. Because of our large area of responsibility, a forecast of "scattered showers and thunderstorms" may be the best we can do.

Likewise, our cohorts in the National Weather Service are chartered to provide "general weather outlooks" — not specific forecasts for special interests. They also have too many other tasks at hand to spend the day talking to hundreds of private businesses, farmers or country clubs. In order to get more information for your individual needs, you may want to consider contracting with a Private Weather Consultant.

Private Weather Consultants are independent businesses who contract with other companies that

need specific weather information. For example, Weather Central, the company I am with, is contracted to provide hour by hour temperature, wind and humidity forecasts for several Wisconsin power utilities. This daily information is used to help predict the electric load that will be on the utility later in the day. This can be critical in hot weather when everyone turns up the air conditioning. By knowing in advance that the electric load will be high, utilities can be ready with backup generation or purchase power from other utilities to avoid a cutback in service or blackouts.

In the case of Weather Central, we employ a dozen degreed meteorologists. Each is fully trained in forecasting and weather analysis, and is a member of the American Meteorological Society. Our forecasters look at much the same type of information as the forecasters in the National Weather Service, and make their own predictions of further weather conditions. As an independent source of weather forecasts, the private consultant often will invest heavily in new equipment to help them do a better job. At Weather Central, we have 24 hour a day satellite movies, our own radar, and the state's only cloud-to-ground lightning strike detection system. Such high tech equipment, along with other computer data sources, enable us to keep tabs on developing bad weather anywhere in Wisconsin and over most of North America.

Whether the weather comes from Weather Central or any other private consultant, it will, of course, cost money. Many consultants offer a wide range of services that may be as simple as an occasional call when the weather gets bad, or as elaborate as 2 or more scheduled calls each day with printed forecast forms or direct forecast input into your personal computer. Because your service is custom tailored, the rates will vary depending upon your needs. A good ball park figure is about \$150 per month for a call in service with no forms, up to \$350 per month for 2 to 3 scheduled calls each day using specially prepared forms or direct computer input.

The main difference between "getting the forecast free from TV"

and "paying a consultant," is really fundamental. The "free forecasts" do not take into account your needs — they are a homogenous product put together to try and serve the majority of the public. The "fee forecasts" are developed with you in mind. Your course becomes a point-source for the forecast, so instead of predicting scattered showers, we can say, "the rain is just past you and it should stay dry through tonight." The TV weatherman and the National Weather Service won't go out of business if they miss your forecast. If you employ a consultant, you are his bread and butter — he had better do a job that is worth your money. In addition, the private consultant is there when you need him. Most consultants operate 24 hours a day, so if you have a question, the phone will be answered by a trained individual.

Over the course of a summer, you might spend \$500 to \$1,000 for a weather consultant. Our goal is to save you much more than that. Consider the cost of applying a herbicide over your course. If the chemical needs 12 hours of dry weather or rain with 6 hours or whatever, you can waste thousands of dollars in material and labor costs if the weather doesn't cooperate. Private Weather Consultants want to help you and your course save time, dollars and frustration often spent on incorrect "guesses" about the weather. Since we forecast with you in mind, we can better answer such questions as start and stop times for rain, precipitation amounts and intensities, temperature trends and the extended weather outlook. Think about how many times you have wished for more weather information or someone to really talk to about an approaching storm. If that happens frequently, you may want to consider a private consultant for your weather forecasts.

Editor's Note: Mike Nelson is a native and lifelong resident of Madison, and grew up playing golf at Blackhawk Country Club. Mike is currently Executive Vice President for the Weather Central Division of ColorGraphics Systems, and received a B.S. degree in Meteorology from the UW-Madison. He has been with Weather Central since 1976 and is the Meteorologist for the Wisconsin TV Network. He is a member of the American Meteorological Society. Mike and his wife Cindy welcomed their first child — a baby girl — on July 1st. Congratulations!