



“The Golfer’s Right to Know”

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Several states around the country have been grappling with the issue of posting home lawns after lawncare companies have applied materials to them. The issues of private property, government intrusion, and the relative safety of the materials applied all have entered into the debate over posting.

The issue of posting on the golf course, after pesticide applications have been made, is a subject that was briefly discussed when “AG 29” was being run through various committees here in Wisconsin. The amount of materials applied to high maintenance turf, such as a golf course, coupled with the number of people who traverse a golf course during the day, would seem to indicate that the subject deserves some discussion.

The mere mention of posting by someone in the industry will cause many people to wring their hands and say, “Oh no, don’t bring that subject up, let a sleeping dog lie.” You can take the tact of not discussing something for fear that simple discussion will bring unwanted legislation and more regulations.

However, pesticides usage is something that has changed around us rapidly over the last 10 years, and outside forces are going to further change their use and understanding in our society.

The dooms day, “environmentalist” types will lobby against any or all pesticides, while the chemical lobby will proclaim the total safety of their products. As is quite often the case, the truth lies somewhere in between. In recent studies at the University of Wisconsin Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems it was found that crops produced with the most chemicals netted \$120 per acre. Crops produced with no pesticides, to the delight of the environmentalist, had a net profit of \$136 per acre; while crops produced with only a few chemicals, on an as needed basis, netted the best profit at \$153 per acre. As can be seen, the most profitable use of pesticides in agriculture is somewhere between the maximum and none.

The problem with discussing pesticides and posting is the emotional side of the issue and the uneven portrayal of pesticides by the media. The word

pesticide is used in the same breath by the media as poison, illness, birth defects and all kinds of other very negative terms. The media has played up the negative side of pesticides, for the sake of selling newspapers and keeping our dials tuned, with little regard for factual reporting. Pesticides and the home yard, or golf course, can exist in harmony if used properly, according to the label, and with an integrated pest management approach.

But what about the golf course? Are we using materials properly, by the label, and with an integrated pest management approach? Where should we stand on posting? In most cases we are using these materials properly. But all too often the golf course superintendent is pressed to have the look and play of a PGA tour event course all season long. Golf’s boom period, which we are all experiencing now, fuels this desire of the golfer to play on a course that looks like the tour courses on TV.

Besides that yard stick to measure by, we start competing against one another to be greener, faster and more impeccably manicured than our neighbor. This all leads to a greater dependence on pesticides to help insure we have that totally manicured look.

Everyone has been caught by a disease or insect attack that damages or destroys a turf area. No one likes to alibi or make excuses as to why that turf is dead or thin. We all know the way to cover ourselves on that front is to always apply enough pesticide so that no disease or insect can cause turf damage.

This is fine as long as we apply the materials by the label rate and follow all the label instructions. “The label is the law,” as it is said.

But the question has to be asked: “Was that pesticide application really necessary, was it timed right, and did we spray mainly to cover ourselves so we did not have to face someone and make excuses about a turf problem?”

I maintain that too often we are all guilty of falling into that trap. We apply pesticides to cover ourselves against what “might” happen to the turf. A leading entomologist speaking at a recent turf conference indicated that the majority of insecticide applications

were ineffective due to improper timing of application.

I like my job and I don’t need any grief from players. People who pay a lot of money to belong to a golf club don’t like excuses. So why make excuses — when in doubt, spray it. As long as we do it by the label, the label is the law, we are doing things legal we say. But it’s environmentally questionable. We should perhaps look a little closer at why we apply a pesticide. Agriculture has found that less pesticide is indeed more profitable.

If you could do a comparison of how much material was applied to a golf course in 1967, 1977, and 1987 we would all be astounded. I had to do that in 1989, and I was amazed. The standards of course maintenance have been elevated to such a level that the use of one of our strongest tools, pesticides, has increased tenfold or greater. A 20-year comparison such as I had to do can make you step back and seriously study what you are doing and why.

I know why I apply pesticides as often as I do, and I wish I didn’t have to. I wish I could take the tact of agriculture and back off on these materials. But as long as the golfer is adamant in his desire for this fine manicured look on a course, our hands are tied.

But I now begin to wonder if the player is aware that for us to achieve these increasingly rigid course conditions, we are applying tremendous amounts of pesticides. If the players knew, would they feel comfortable playing on a course under these conditions?

This brings us back to the issue of posting or perhaps more directly “the player’s right to know what we are doing.” Should anyone be aware of how dramatically pesticide use has increased on the golf course? Should the players be told anything that we are doing or will they overreact and panic because of all the media hype about the evils of pesticides? Someone other than the superintendent should know.

Our employees by Federal law have a “right to know”. I think committees entrusted with the decision-making authority over the greens operation should at least be aware of how we manicure the course. If a committee or board desires to have the fine manicuring, using the optimum amount of pesticides, then it is their decision and no one can complain later that they had no idea what we were doing. Whether the course is posted or not, people at least have a right to know.