

A Relatively Uneventful Season - All Things Considered

By Bob Vavrek, Agronomist, North Central Region, USGA Green Section

"If I couldn't grow grass this summer, maybe I should consider another line of work" was the comment heard from a number of superintendents across the Region last year. Indeed, the weather was mild compared to the hot, stressful growing conditions experienced during the 1995 season. Only a few courses experienced even one day over 90 degrees.

Of course, it never hurts to enter the growing season in good condition. Courses that stumbled out of the starting blocks, due to winterkill to *Poa annua*, were few and far between. The winter weather was unusually mild - a familiar pattern over the past few years. Warm weather during March and April resulted in early green up, which set the stage for a considerable amount of early season play. Heavy play before vigorous turf growth occurs was a concern at many popular courses. The mild winter and the thinning caused by early play on semi-dormant turf were probably contributing factors for the bumper crop of weeds that plagued many courses. Clover, dandelions, and crabgrass were especially troublesome.

Dollar spot control was a challenge for most superintendents. It was definitely the number one problem across the north central tier of states. The weather conditions were ideal for intense disease activity practically all summer. To make matters worse, dollar spot pressure did not subside very much during September and October. Standard fungicide programs fell flat on their face or, at best, provided marginal control unless the interval between applications was modified to compensate for heavy disease pressure. A fair amount of take-all patch was diagnosed on a surprising number of old and new courses this summer as well.

In spite of the hype over bentgrass dead spot, there has yet to be a documented case of this disease in Wisconsin, Minnesota, or Michigan - according to the plant disease diagnostic labs in these states. There are a few suspect greens on a few new courses (very few) that have some symptoms, but the pathogen has not yet been isolated from affected tissue. It's probably only a matter of time before this problem is discovered in the Region. Many superintendents who think they have seen it on their greens this summer were more than likely looking at ball mark damage and/or dollar spot.

With a few exceptions, most of the Region experienced ample rainfall this season. Too much, in fact, for some superintendents who battled 6 to 8-inch rain events that fell within a 12 to 24-hour period more than once this

summer. Devastating streambank erosion and bunker washouts were seen on many Turf Advisory Service visits.

Mowing heights on greens continued to be lowered to placate the golfer's desire and demand for faster and faster green speed. Shaving the greens down and wet weather provided ideal conditions for moss encroachment. The problem intensified at many courses having a history of moss in putting surfaces and some courses experienced this trouble for the first time.

Ant and earthworm activity on fairways and approaches were a concern on many private courses that mow the playing surfaces at or below 1/2-inch. Japanese beetles continued their march westward across the Region. They have become well established in southeast Wisconsin and hot spots of grubs and/or adults were causing damage in Madison, Eau Claire, and in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area.

As a final thought, probably the most universal concern across the Region was finding and retaining dependable labor. An increasing number of courses have had success utilizing immigrant workers to supplement the maintenance staff. As long as the economy remains strong, the labor issue will continue to worsen unless wages for temporary help are significantly increased. Even competitive wages have not been enough to keep some courses adequately staffed in many of the resort areas where competition for labor is especially keen.

When dollar spot and clover are the primary concern, you know it's been a relatively easy season. Let's hope for another in 2001. 🌱



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