



# 1st Annual Alternative Turfgrass Meeting

By **Tod Blankenship**, Golf Course Superintendent, Big Fish Golf Club

Thanks to all who attended and helped to make a successful first annual Alternative Turfgrass Discussion on Monday June 11th. This event brought together our three regional superintendent associations—the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Northern Great Lakes Golf Course Superintendents Associations.

The panel discussion featured speakers who have extensive experience with “Alternative Grasses” and included Dr. Eric Watkins from the University of Minnesota, Eric Koeritz from the

University of Wisconsin, Bob Vavrek from the USGA Green Section, and Larry Thornton with Superior Turf Services. All of the speakers contributed their thoughts and their experiences with alternative turfgrasses and the resulting discussion was very informative and parlayed some hope for the use of these grasses in the future. While some key points were made there is still much to be learned from and about these grasses if they are to be used to any extent in our region.


Impending government regula-

tions and our own expectations as golf turf managers to provide ideal golfing conditions with fewer inputs, have led some in the industry to seek alternative choices for sustainable grasses. These grasses have been around for many years; yet since the inception of heavy chemical usage, limited availability of quality seed, and an American golfing enigma for near perfect conditions their use has been limited until more recent years. These grasses are continuing to improve in quality and availability yet until the



golfing public accepts a different "look" to golf turf, their use may continue to be limited. Indeed the idea of less water, chemical, and fertilizer inputs is novel to all of us as turf managers; however, the general public are the ones we need to educate. Thanks to the efforts of plant breeders and research personnel there are quality low input grasses for use on golf courses now widely available. With the continued efforts of industry professionals, such as those featured at the meeting, we will hopefully begin to persuade the American golfing public that these grasses can work and that "Augusta Green" should not be a standard.

As for the golf that followed the discussion, the golf course was playing great. The format was a Schamble and everybody played from the tips. Once everybody caught their breath from walking to the way back tees, they were able to catch a glimpse of the entire golf hole. Although I did hear some initial grumbling about the tee choice, I think everybody still had a great time and were witness to how an alternatively grassed golf course can play as they saw their ball rolling and rolling down the fairway. Many admit after playing a round at Big Fish Golf Club, it is a type of golf they do not see very often and the grasses are the primary reason. After all of the scores were posted and 7,000 plus yards caught up, I think everyone who attended had a good feel for what types of challenges these grasses can create. Conditioning can only improve as we better learn to manage these low input grasses.

The end result was a great day full of excellent education, wonderful weather, and hopefully the beginning of an "alternative" tradition. I hope more people will take advantage of the opportunity to meet new people from other associations next year and enable us to continue to grow this event. I look forward to seeing all who attended again next year and many more and maybe, just maybe, we will move up a tee or two. Have a great rest of the 2007 season. 

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