

Robbing Peter to Pay Paul

By Bob Vavrek, Senior Agronomist, USGA Green Section

A quiet, snowy day in the office is a good time to consider how you are going to provide the same level of course conditioning in 2009 when maintenance costs have increased, but the operating budget has been slashed by 10% to 20%. If you happen to nod off at your desk for a few minutes after a long afternoon of considering a variety of difficult options, only in your dreams does a bail out check arrive in the mail to supplement the budget.

One option to consider is to trim the fat off excessive fairway acreage this season. Most golf courses I visit have at least a few acres of unnecessary fairway turf that could be converted to rough with relatively little impact on playability. For example, par three holes are notorious for having far too much fairway turf between the tee and green. A modest area of short grass at the approach to the green is appropriate, but 100 yards of fairway on a 140 yard hole will sap limited resources all season.

Some golf courses have had good success widening the fairway landing zones a bit on a par 4 or 5 hole as compensation (or consolation) for converting some fairway turf to rough with the intent of necessitating at least a 50 to 75 yard carry off the tee to the short grass. Now some will argue that a straight 35 yard dribbler off the tee deserves to land on fairway, but most would (or should) argue that those complaining are hitting from the wrong set of tees anyway. The bottom line is that roughs require less water, fertilizer, plant protectants, and mowing versus fairways.

However, converting fairway to rough or vice-versa is not as simple

as it seems. To those without turf degrees or experience, the process of converting fairway to rough appears to require no more than raising the height of cut from 1/2 inch to 2 1/2 inches and simply letting nature take its course. Assuming the course is fortunate enough to have predominantly bentgrass fairways, golfers don't realize what a gnarly, unplayable condition they would encounter from a 2 1/2 inch bentgrass rough.

The more likely scenario at older courses across the north central states is *Poa annua* fairways. Old *Poa* on old fairways is just plain strange when it comes to changing heights of cut. Some patches of *Poa* that have been maintained for many years at a 1/2 inch height of cut will not grow much higher than 1/2 inch regardless of where you set the mower. Raise the height of cut of an old bentgrass/Kentucky bluegrass/*Poa annua*/perennial ryegrass fairway and you usually get a patchwork quilt of turf that looks bad and plays even worse.

You could use commercial sod to expand roughs or widen fairways, but sod is expensive and not very compatible with the cost-cutting theme of this article. In addition, bentgrass or bluegrass sod will stick out like a sore thumb on an old course for years.

Consider robbing Peter to pay Paul, and utilize the turf already present on the course for fairway/rough conversions. There will always be some areas of good to excellent quality rough that are relatively out of play and available to use as a home grown sod. In many ways, this turf will be better than commercial sod. The turf composition and soil type will match the surrounding grass better than any material from

distant sod farms and you won't have to pay for shipping. Strip the sod from an irrigated area, if possible, and the process of re-establishing turf from seed in this site will be much easier. This way the turf most likely to come into play will be able to accommodate golfers first.

Don't waste the short grass you harvest from fairways either. The fairway grass closest to tees is usually dense and healthy since it accommodates little traffic throughout the season; and fairway turf is usually the same or similar height of cut as turf found on tees. Dense fairway sod can be ideal for regrassing some of the heavily divotted par 3 tees on the course.

Deep budget cuts will require sacrifices, and sacrificing a few acres of unnecessary fairways will, unlike our 401 k programs, pay dividends for many years. 🌱

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