

Pinpointing Approaching Weather Can Be Most Helpful, Especially in Minnesota

Minnesota . . . land of 10,000 lakes, 50 kinds of mosquitos and some of the most intense weather anywhere.

Few places in the world can go from 110 degrees in summer to 40 below in winter and, aside from hurricanes, Minnesotans experience it all: sweltering heat to bitter cold, tornados to the Dog Days of August, floods to droughts.

"In the Twin Cities, for example, 50 days out of the year see weather which is more than just inconvenient, it's life-threatening," says Sheri Akemann, meteorologist for Total Weather, a private weather service based in Wayzata.

The Midwest is where air masses converge. Warm Pacific air collides with cold, Canadian air. Gulf of Mexico moisture collides with dry desert air from the west. These collisions create powerful weather systems that cover hundreds of thousands of square miles and have the potential of literally all types of weather.

"We're also a long way from oceans, which have a modifying influence, and mountains, which have a slowing-down effect," she notes. "A weather pattern, which could take 12 hours to develop along coastal regions, can spring up here in less than three hours. With the addition of tornados, hail, floods and lightning, the implications of life-threatening weather are strong."

Akemann says that "it can be essential to have good, detailed, pinpoint information for specific parts of the state or region. As a result, dozens of private weather services exist, but with surprisingly few in the Upper Midwest."

Total Weather, for example, provides tailored weather forecasts to a variety of outdoor industries, including golf courses. Among Minnesota courses using the service are Hazeltine National, Wayzata Country Club and Midland Hills.

At Midland, Scott Austin, head superintendent, likes the detailed, daily forecasts.

"It's another tool to use in management, especially for planning projects," he said. "The wind and rain forecasts help us determine when we should spray pesticides or fertilize. It seems fairly dependable. The severe weather notification also is important, either by phone or fax."

At Wayzata, Head Superintendent Jim Lindblad primarily uses the services for safety."

"I watch Channel 17, but it goes off the air at 4 p.m., and I'm not always in the office to monitor it," he said. "So I count on the service for that phone call. Earlier this summer it was sunny, and I had no idea anything was developing. They called us to let us know that heavy thunderstorms were coming so we could warn everyone."

During a typical severe weather afternoon, Akemann says that Total Weather may call a course with updates two to three times.

"We may call at noon and tell the superintendent to expect storms to hit around 5 p.m.," she said. "As the day progresses, we may call back and say to watch for storms in the next half-hour. Our service also offers two-way communication. A client may call us anytime and get specific information when he or she needs it."

A classic example was during the U.S. Open at Hazeltine in June.

Head Superintendent Chris Hague said he called the meteorologists at Total Weather 6-12 times a day.

"I'd start at 4:30 or 5 in the morning," Hague said. "They were very accurate with short-range weather and thunderstorms, although they couldn't necessarily tell us where lightning would strike."

"The USGA was using other sources, but by the third or fourth day they started asking me for information," Hague said. "They used what I had because it was more accurate."

Hague said the "best part of the service is the direct, one-on-one contact—right to my cellular phone. It's a great service to have, especially during critical times."

Forecasts generally are faxed twice daily to the clubhouse or superintendent's office and are site-specific in three-hour increments. Updates are faxed or phoned, as needed.

"We think the National Weather Service does an excellent job," Akemann said, "and in no way want to diminish that. However, they don't have the staff, time or incentive to personalize the information. We do and we hope that over the course of the season, we'll give our clients more accurate information that ultimately will save lives."