



This satellite image from September shows how the wildfire smoke blankets much of the West Coast.

NO SMOKING ON THE GOLF COURSE

BY CORY ISOM | AGRONOMIST, WEST REGION

An eerie orange darkness overshadowed what is normally a beautiful scenic drive through Oregon's Santiam Pass. It was Labor Day and I was headed to Central Oregon for some Course Consulting Service visits. By early the next morning, reports began to come in that some of the small communities that I had driven through just hours earlier had been burned by wildfires.

Will 2020 ever end?

For many weeks now, wildfires have raged in the West Region. The loss of life and damage to property bring a new level of sadness to people already struggling with pandemic-induced challenges.

Writing about golf course maintenance seems a bit trivial in the midst of what many people are going through. However, spending time with people on golf courses seems to bring some level of normalcy to

an abnormal time in our history. As golf course turf continues to grow and golfers flock to socially distant forms of recreation, the golf world marches on albeit under a smoky veil.

So... what does smoke do to golf courses? Thankfully, this is not an area that has had to be researched much. One recent study in California looked at wildfire smoke's affect on crops in the agriculturally rich Central Valley during an exceptionally smoky 2018. Researchers found that while overall light levels were slightly reduced, quality of light was improved. The diffusion of light through the smoke particulate allowed leaves in the lower canopy to receive more high-quality light than they would have had in direct sunlight. These increased light levels translated into greater amounts of photosynthesis and subsequent growth. Turf response to smoke is likely similar to those observed in crops, but what does that mean for turf managers?

In response to the poor air quality, many courses have taken precautions with their staff and either closed their courses temporarily or allowed staff working outside to stay home or work reduced hours. Staff able and willing to work in these conditions are wisely taking a few more clean air breaks during the day. This all translates into less work being done on the course. Many superintendents were looking forward to productive Fall maintenance practices, but with reduced labor opportunities they have had to adjust, yet again, to the latest challenge of 2020.

So, while preliminary research indicates that plants may thrive in smoke, humans do not.



For information on the USGA's Course Consulting Service Contact the Green Section Staff.

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