

→ A Warm, Dry Winter Brings Challenges

BY CLARK THROSSELL, PH.D.

It has been a warm, dry winter across much of the country. For many golf courses in the central and northern parts of the country this is the old good news, bad news scenario. First the good news, the warm weather brings out golfers and the money they spend to play golf, rent carts, purchase merchandise and food and beverages. In many central and northern locations, any revenue during December, January and February is an unexpected bonus and helps get 2012 off to a good financial start.

And now for the bad news. Traffic from golfers and carts wears out the grass. It is a challenge to get golfers to understand that despite the favorable weather for golf, it is not warm enough for the grass plants to grow. And sustained growth is how turfgrass plants cope with the wear that traffic brings. While air temperatures are in the 40s, 50s and maybe even the low 60s, that is not warm enough to achieve sustained turfgrass growth. Also, keep in mind that it is slow to warm up in the morning and fast to cool off in late afternoon, so the grass only experiences warm temperatures for a very short period of time in the middle of the day.

What can be done to manage the traffic that comes with winter golf? Banning golf carts in winter would be a great first step, but that just isn't going to happen for two very important reasons: revenue and golfer pref-

erence. Since golf carts will be used during the winter, it becomes a matter of limiting the damage they cause.

Some superintendents try to restrict golf cart traffic to roughs only with fairway crossing allowed at 90 degrees. This works for some and not others. On golf courses with zoysia-grass or bermudagrass fairways and cool season grass rough, golf carts are often restricted to rough only during

“It is a challenge to get golfers to understand that despite the favorable weather for golf, it is not warm enough for the grass plants to grow.”

the winter. On these courses in the transition zone the cool season grass rough often stays green throughout the winter and makes it easier for golfers to abide by the rough-only rule.

Fairways that are subjected to regular golf cart traffic in the winter in northern locations with cool season grass should be prepared for diminished fairway quality in the spring and even into early summer. It will

take that long for the grass to grow and recover. Take photos of traffic patterns now so you can refresh memories in spring if wear damage is apparent. Inform those in leadership positions at the club of the potential problem now while they can see the traffic patterns.

Using ropes, stakes, signs and any other traffic control device is a good idea to spread traffic out near greens and tees. Or you can confine traffic to a single route and then sod the damaged areas in the spring. Or maybe using both strategies on different areas of the golf course makes sense for you.

Traffic management on putting greens is a challenge as well. If the golf course is located where the soil doesn't freeze, changing cups as needed is a great way to evenly distribute wear. In northern locations where the soil freezes, superintendents often place three or four cups on a single green. The cups are widely spaced to help distribute wear. While some golf courses ask that the golfers rotate the flag among the cups on a single green, it might make more sense for the superintendent to rotate the flags among the cups. This way the superintendent can observe each green and make the decision where to place the flag to better manage wear.

Warmer winter weather brings the golfers out of hibernation and out on to the fairways. There is no single right answer to managing traffic in winter. Do what makes sense at your golf course.

Clark Throssell, Ph.D., is a turfgrass scientist and can be reached at cthrossell@questex.com.