

Winter Season Golfer Alert

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Twice in the past 25 years, the USGA Green Section Florida Region has sent letters to all golf courses in the state in an effort to make golfers aware of the effects of adverse conditions on the environment. The 1998 winter season is a case in point, where the Pacific El Nino effect caused major problems in providing the expected conditioning and quality at Florida golf courses. The purpose of this update is the same.

An El Nino condition is warmer than average surface sea temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean. Although it's located thousands of miles away, it influences weather conditions across the United States. As in the past, when a moderate to strong El Nino is in place, winter temperatures in the Southeast and Florida are colder than average, while at the same time precipitation is above average. The extended stretches of cold temperatures in January and February resulted in average temperatures four to five degrees below normal, and the National Weather Service recently reported that this was the second coldest January to February on record in West Palm Beach, going back to 1888. The average temperature for the season, reported at Palm Beach International Airport, was 64.1 degrees F; 3.2 degrees below normal.

Although 3.2 degrees below normal average may not seem significant, it has a major impact on warm season turfgrass growth, such as bermudagrass and seashore paspalum, in the central to southern part of the state. Basically, there has been no turf growth for the past two months, and, when combined with peak winter season play, the fairways and roughs at many courses have been beat down and worn out. Normally, during this time of year, there are golfer complaints about tight fairway lies and no definition between the fairway and rough cuts, but the degree of deterioration experienced at some courses is greater than normal.

An even greater impact on conditioning and quality occurs at facilities that deal with budget cuts, where further reductions in fertilization and pest control programs have taken place. The one silver lining to the cold weather is that it makes it easy to provide medium fast to fast putting speeds.

During the second week of March, temperatures have started to climb into the 70's throughout the state. After all of the cold weather, these temperatures feel quite warm and are sufficient to produce a turf green-up. However, based on the extended forecast, this will be a short-lived spring tease. The Climate Prediction Center of the National Weather Service issued its latest El Nino Advisory, and, based on all of the forecast models, the El Nino effect will remain in place until at least May. For Florida and the Southeast, temperatures will continue to remain below average and precipitation above average. A cool and wet spring is just the opposite of what is needed for recovery from the winter and to quickly reestablish course conditioning.

For warm season turfgrasses to resume sustained active growth, daytime and nighttime temperatures must remain consistently in the mid-80 and mid-60 degree range, respectively. In Central to South Florida, the combination of a progressively increasing day length and milder temperatures will make it possible to reestablish the green color, but, regardless of inputs, forcing the resumption of sustained growth activity and being able to produce a rapid recovery simply is not possible.

Though the extent of winter overseeding programs has been cut back at courses in the northern part of Florida, the prospect of a cool and wet spring raises additional concerns about increased difficulties and a more pronounced deterioration in conditions during the transition process out of the overseeding cover. This is because growth and maturing of the overseeding grasses is favored, and they are able to persist longer and have a competitive advantage over the underlying base bermudagrass. We can only hope that the current, long range forecasts are wrong.

On a positive note, the base bermuda turf of Florida golf courses does possess a tremendous recuperative potential. Thus, with a few weeks of sunny, warm, and dry weather, a full recovery and reestablishment of good quality course conditioning can be accomplished. Yet, until more favorable environmental conditions are occurring, a degree of patience and understanding will be required during the remainder of the winter play season in Florida.

USGA Green Section agronomists cannot change the weather, but a timely Turfgrass Advisory Service (TAS) visit can be a life saver at a course affected by the adverse environmental conditions. Site visits can include a presentation regarding techniques for recovery and general questions and answers about winter season course management. The USGA Green Section staff is an unmatched resource in aiding your course with the establishment and implementation of maintenance standards. We have nothing to sell, and our ultimate goal is in your best interest. The minimal cost of utilizing your local Green Section agronomist is synonymous with investing in a regular physical examination. Being prepared is always better than being surprised, and when difficult decisions need to be made, having history to draw upon guards the outcome.