THINK TWICE
About Priorities When Cutting Maintenance Costs

Trying to keep your head above water while your course is closed by COVID-19 is, unfortunately, job No. 1 for many golf course owners and operators. With no revenue coming in it is critical to manage costs, particularly for golf course maintenance. But, as you consider cuts you should also think about what shape you want your course to be in when it does reopen. There is no single answer to this question because individual situations, finances and views of the future vary tremendously.

What product do I need to offer to my customers and members when courses reopen? You will need to win back your regular customers when you reopen but will they expect the conditions you typically have had or will they be so happy to be golfing that conditions don’t matter? Think about the quality of greens you will need, the level of weeds that would be acceptable, the quality and consistency of rough needed, and fairway color and turf coverage you would want among other factors.

Here a few things to “think twice about” as you consider cuts to your maintenance plan:

• **THINK TWICE** about making any changes to your putting greens program. When the greens are great, golfers forgive other sins on the rest of the course. Keep your greens great. Core aerify this spring, maintain good nutrition, topdress/verticut, and apply plant protectants according to your agronomic plan. If closures continue into summer months, consider raising the height of cut by 10-20% to improve stress tolerance.

• **THINK TWICE** about eliminating tee and fairway pre-emergent herbicide applications or preventative fungicide and insecticide applications. Pre-emergent herbicide applications are cost effective in the long run and chasing weeds for the summer and fall can be expensive, unsightly, and potentially damaging to the turf. Preventative fungicide and insecticide applications can help prevent turf loss or thin spots in tees and fairways.
• **THINK TWICE** about continuing bulk granular tee and fairway fertilizer applications. These cause flushes of turf growth that may require more frequent mowing, and lush turf when you don’t need it. Add a bit of nitrogen fertilizer (say 0.2 pounds of N per 1,000 square feet) to your preventive or pre-emergent applications in the form of a foliar fertilizer. It will keep the turf (and roots) healthy without stimulating unnecessary growth.

• **THINK TWICE** about spending any money beyond pre-emergent herbicide in the rough other than mowing it periodically when growth demands. Missing a pre-emergent application in rough could result in significant weed pressure and seed production in areas surrounding greens, tees and fairway. You don’t want these weed seeds migrating onto high profile surfaces. Fortunately, there are some very economical pre-emergent herbicide options for all turf species. If you can’t afford the entire rough, consider one to two passes around all fairways, tees and greens.

• **THINK TWICE** about cutting any resources for maintaining your irrigation system. Even if you have to cut water, make sure that the water you use gets to where you want it. Golf irrigation systems generally require daily adjustment and repairs. Skimping on irrigation maintenance can result in turf loss fairly quickly, especially with rising summer temperatures.

• **THINK TWICE** about spending money on keeping up with course “detail” such as edging cart paths, bunkers, etc. These items can be “blitzed” in the days before opening.

• And finally, **THINK TWICE** about laying off your key skilled people. This goes beyond the Superintendent and Assistant to include Spray Techs, Irrigation Techs and Mechanics. Don’t assume that they will be available to come back when the course reopens.

*There is no “one size fits all” approach to managing maintenance expenses. But instead of “skating to where the puck is” spend some time thinking about “skating to where the puck will be”.*