

Chasing Color

Many of today's golfers think that if the turfgrass isn't green, it is dead.

by PATRICK M. O'BRIEN

OVER THE YEARS, I have spoken at hundreds of Golf Association meetings on topics ranging from *Poa annua* control to putting green reconstruction. No topic stirs up the pot more than the debate over whether or not to overseed dormant bermudagrass fairways for winter play. The desire to play on green fairway turf all year round is a popular notion, but few golfers understand that they are giving up long-range course improvements to have green fairway turf during the winter.

Today, fairways are being overseeded more than ever for various reasons. Historically, resorts throughout the South overseeded to attract golfers during the winter months. Resort courses have always placed a premium on the winter golf season since most of their play occurs at that time of the year. Over the past 10 to 15 years, new housing developments associated with golf courses in the South have overseeded to help sell real estate. Municipal and daily-fee courses have also been overseeding to entice golfers to play during the winter months. Even private clubs today are being lured into this practice. The primary reason most private courses overseed is for aesthetics. Television tournaments have encouraged demands for Augusta-like perfection and wall-to-wall green grass. But, even if your budget can afford fairway overseeding and the required maintenance that accompanies it, you need to ask if it is worth implementing. I find many courses can't afford this luxury maintenance practice and I hate seeing maintenance dollars being wasted on overseeding when there are so many other needs.

At most board meetings when overseeding is discussed, a cost estimate is assumed. Unfortunately, course officials and sometimes golf course superintendents assume that the major expense associated with overseeding is the seed itself. I've witnessed many course officials approve overseeding based on

seed cost, when the additional equipment and labor expenses required can significantly exceed the cost of the seed. An overseeding cost worksheet (Table 1) developed by Bill Anderson, golf course superintendent at the Carmel Country Club, Charlotte, N.C., provides a line item expense report that can be used to estimate fairway overseeding costs. These items include the additional seed, fertilizers, herbicides, growth regulators, water, labor, and equipment costs that may be associated with fairway overseeding.

This fairway overseeding cost worksheet is invaluable to assist course officials with the development of a new budget that would include fairway overseeding. By filling out this expense report, many courses will realize that this strategy may not be cost-effective.

Many courses may decide that other course improvements merit approval in place of fairway overseeding. Whether fairway overseeding costs are \$25,000 or \$300,000 today, these expenses may be better allocated to other long-term improvements, such as cart paths, irrigation systems, turf equipment, maintenance buildings, drainage, new putting greens, etc. These improvements will last much longer than the six to eight months of temporary fairway aesthetics.

The aesthetic and playability benefits associated with fairway overseeding are not always achieved. A poor spring transition and the resulting slow recovery back to the base bermudagrass

can cause poor summer playing conditions. As soon as the bermudagrass recovers in the late summer, overseeding occurs again and the cycle just repeats itself. Some years, even the overseeding is poor, and neither the winter nor the summer fairway surface is very good. Other intangibles include the fairway disturbance and wetter conditions for three weeks in the fall during seeding establishment, and the potential for more weeds with the limited herbicide options.

The decision to overseed fairways is a decision that must be made by each individual course. Avoid the common pitfall of copying what neighboring courses may be doing, as it may not be the best for your site. While fairway overseeding is inherently neither right nor wrong, it is vital that the course considers the required costs and agronomic practices before making the decision. By considering these factors, the course can make a decision on overseeding that is appropriate for their situation.

If a golf course's budget can allow for fairway overseeding as well as long-term goals, I have no problem with the private courses allocating funds for this expenditure. Otherwise, I'd vote for a good long-range plan, not lush, green fairway turf from October to May.

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TABLE 1
Overseeding Cost Worksheet at Carmel Country Club, Charlotte, N.C.

Item	Unit Cost	Units Required	Total Cost
Seed		@ 400 lbs. per acre	
18 holes (30 acres)	\$1.10 per lb.	12,000 lbs.	\$13,200
Additional Fertilizers			
18 holes (30 acres)	\$50 per acre	30	\$1,500
Additional Herbicides			
18 holes (30 acres)	\$60 per acre	30	\$1,800
Additional Growth Regulators			
18 holes (30 acres)	\$215 per acre	30	\$6,450
Additional Water			
18 holes (30 acres)	L/S		\$4,500
Additional Labor			
18 holes	\$2,500 per hole	18	\$45,000
Additional Equipment			
Drop spreader	\$2,000		\$2,000
Verticut reels	\$8,700		\$8,700
Vacuum	\$23,500		\$23,500
Fairway mower	\$30,400		\$30,400
TOTAL			\$137,050