

The Industry Buzz

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"I'm About Green Grass"

At Intelligent Use of Water event, Emerson says turf doesn't need to be brown for superintendents to be efficient irrigators

BY LARRY AYLWARD / EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Why am I standing up?" Shawn Emerson asked the audience. "Because I've irrigated more than 19 billion gallons of water on golf courses."

Indeed, when you've irrigated that much water, you're more than qualified to speak at a conference on water. And that's why Emerson, director of agronomy at the Desert Mountain Club in Scottsdale, Ariz., was speaking at the Intelligent Use of Water Summit XIII: "Play on! Water Issues in Today's Sport Turf Environment," an event sponsored by Rain Bird and the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation and held on the Michigan State University campus in East Lansing, Mich., on Jan. 24.

At 19 million gallons and counting, don't think for a minute that Emerson, who oversees six Jack Nicklaus designs at Desert Mountain Club, is watering away like there's no tomorrow. That said, Emerson prefers green turfgrass to brown turfgrass.

"There's one thing that I can't stand hearing, and I can't get my arms around," Emerson said. "It's the statement: 'Brown is the new green.' Where did we get that from?"

It came from former United States Golf Association President Jim Hyler, who said, "We need to understand how brown can become the new green," when talking about conditioning and consumption of water during the USGA's annual meeting three years ago.

"That's not what I'm about," Emerson said. "I'm about green grass."

But Emerson quickly added that he's not about over-irrigating. He said he's striving to become a more efficient, practical and educated irrigator."

Emerson said superintendents today have the wherewithal — from new technology to improved knowledge — to be more responsible irrigators while maintaining green turf.

Emerson said his club hosted the Charles



Shawn Emerson says a solid irrigation plan begins with a sound irrigation delivery system.

Schwab Cup Championship in November, and that "we never turned off the irrigation."

"The comments from the golfers were that it was the firmest golf course they had played," Emerson said.

His point is that golf can be firm and fast — with green fairways.

"It starts with the irrigation delivery system," Emerson said.

Superintendents need to pay the utmost attention to an irrigation system's uniformity and spacing, Emerson added. He advised superintendents to consult an irrigation consultant. He also advised superintendents to listen to their staff members' ideas regarding irrigation efficiency.

"A smart man learns from his mistakes; a genius learns from others," Emerson said.

It costs Desert Mountain \$400,000 per year per golf course to irrigate.

"That's a lot of money," Emerson said, stressing that there's no room for water waste.

That means getting to know every nook and cranny of the golf course, including

soil quality. Desert Mountain has bentgrass greens and bermudagrass fairways.

"In 100-degree weather, where do you think we have more watering problems, with the bentgrass or bermudagrass?" Emerson asked. "Guess what? The bermuda. The soil isn't as good, and it won't take as much water at one time."

So that means adjusting irrigation strategy accordingly, Emerson said.

Superintendents need to check irrigation system components regularly, he added. They also need to pay attention to other factors affecting irrigation, such as pest pressures, moisture retention and nutrient holding.

Despite the wonderful tools they have to do their jobs, Emerson said superintendents still need to monitor their courses by using their God-given senses.

"Boots on the ground is important," Emerson said. "Observation is the most important trait for a superintendent."

Because if you can correct something before it becomes a problem, you can save yourself a lot of money, Emerson said.

"You can't control rain and the weather, but you can control what's controllable on your golf course," he added.

The Intelligent Use of Water Summit XIII also featured Ali Harivandi, Ph.D., University of California Cooperative, extension area specialist; Stacy Bonos, Ph.D., Rutgers Turfgrass Institute; Ken Mangum, director of golf courses and grounds for the Atlanta Athletic Club; Mike Boekholder, head groundskeeper for the Philadelphia Phillies; Carol Colein, executive director of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants; Murray Cook, president of Brickman Sports Turf; and Mitchell Langley, owner of MDL Consulting.

The keynote address was given by Charles Fishman, author of the best-selling book "The Big Thirst."

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