



How Dry We Are

Last year much of the United States suffered through extreme drought conditions, forcing turf managers to alter their usual practices and, in some cases, stop watering their fields altogether. Unfortunately, things are looking grim for 2000.

Following the warmest winter on record, the United States is in the midst of a worsening drought, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Weather Service.

In response to last year's drought, the NOAA, United States Department of Agriculture and the National Drought Mitigation Center created the Drought Monitor, which includes a weekly national map displaying dryness divided into five categories, or levels of intensity. The categories are based on readings from a number of drought indices, giving the user a composite picture of many indicators. Drought information is updated daily through the use of thousands of observations available from cooperative weather observers. The Drought Monitor map can be seen on the Internet at enso.unl.edu/monitor/monitor.html.

NOAA Administrator D. James Baker attributes the drought to La Niña, which has dominated the United States for the past two years and has created serious moisture deficits in several areas. This year, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama experienced their driest February in 106 years, and much of the United States is behind in average rainfall totals.

Whatever the reasons for these dry conditions, turf managers need to be prepared to handle shortages in water and possible restrictions imposed on them from local governments.

Dan Douglas, head groundskeeper for the Reading Phillies in Reading, Pa., was one turf manager who struggled through last year's drought. Early in the summer, he received a letter from the local water authority informing him of the drought and asking him to cut his water use by 30 percent. By mid-summer the state had declared an emergency and asked that all water use be reduced by 50 percent. Then, in late July, they asked Douglas to stop watering his field all together.

"As a professional, and for the safety of the players, I still watered the field right before a game," Douglas said. "But it wasn't nearly enough, and it showed."

Pennsylvania's high schools suffered as well. As students returned for school and fall practice, they encountered fields of dead grass and baked dirt on which they were supposed to play. Some schools banned spikes and encouraged extra stretching to prevent injuries on the concrete-like fields.

Douglas, who serves as President for the KAFMO Chapter of STMA, met with officials from the Department of Environmental Protection soon after watering was banned and began to work on updating the state's drought restrictions. A draft has been prepared and is currently being reviewed, and should be ready for the summer.

I would encourage other turf managers to meet with local government officials to review and perhaps update their water use restrictions to make sure that all fields can receive enough water to remain safe and playable. Also, to keep open the lines of communication, I would encourage you to send me updates on how the drought is affecting you and your fields, and any questions or advice you might have about dealing with a drought. I will include updates throughout the year, either in this column or on our Web site (www.sportsturfonline.com).

In addition, I'd encourage you all to pray for rain, do a rain dance, whatever it takes to get that water falling again, and maybe we can avoid a drought in 2000.

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Tip of the Month

The Blame Game

Documentation can keep you in the clear

Was it a bad hop? Was it an act of God? Or was it a lack of maintenance?

These are the questions that are being asked daily across the country, not only on the fields where the bad hop occurred, but also in courtrooms and judge's chambers where the question is being challenged.

Lawyers and parents today don't believe a ground ball off the chest or a sudden fall while chasing a soccer ball is part of the game anymore. They are pointing fingers at the parties responsible for the daily care and maintenance of the fields.

Who is responsible for the fields when the correct equipment is used in the proper manner? Is the maintenance staff prudent, reasonable and consistent with their daily maintenance techniques? Does someone walk the property daily, weekly, bimonthly to inspect the playing surface, the outfield turf, the bleachers and backstop areas as well as check irrigation heads, fence sections and base receptacles? Has the staff integrated their infield mix with soil additives such as calcined clay to avoid wind drifts, reduce compaction and aid in water absorption? Does the staff actively solicit information on how to handle some of their pressing technical problems through extension services and professional groups?

This short check list for baseball and softball fields is just a sample that maintenance groups should use to document their maintenance procedures.

The ground ball off the chest or the slip at midfield may still occur

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