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## Rising Costs Everywhere



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**M**y local newspaper is running a series on cheap gas prices in the region, pinpointing with maps where locals can buy gas for—\$3.29 a gallon. I ask, define “cheap”? I can remember when it was 65 cents a gallon and paying friends 50 cents for gas money (and feeling the financial hit!).

Sports turf managers are dealing with not only record fuel prices but also the rising cost of fertilizer. I asked Dr. Cale Bigelow, assistant professor of agronomy at Purdue University who studies soil fertility and cultural practices, why fertilizer prices are up:

“There are a variety of reasons. Number one is simple supply and demand,” he says. “Other large countries like China and India are buying a lot of the supply to feed people. Number two is the higher price of natural gas, which is used in the manufacturing process and this cost must be passed on to the consumer.

“Another reason is the increased demand for nutrients in this country to maximize corn biomass production; corn is the primary crop used for ethanol and that equals big bucks right now,” he continues. “Furthermore, high transportation and shipping costs are also being passed along. Finally, a weak U.S. dollar means fertilizer companies have less purchasing power for foreign products.”

I asked Bigelow if there is anything sports turf managers can do to control these costs.

“This is really tough but one thing to look at is tweaking and refining your overall programs and trying to tailor programs to the site a little better,” he says. “Bermudagrass and species like turf-type tall fescue will require slightly less fertilizer but revisiting things like nutrient cycling in terms recycling grass clippings in taller cut turf may make more sense now. This is easier said than done on closely mowed fields, of course.

“Nutrient application rates can be adjusted, at least slightly. If you normally go at 1 pound, try 3/4 pound instead. Check your nutrient sources. For some managers shifting from all granular sources to light, frequent liquid applications may make sense and save money. Among granular sources, some of the natural organics with longer feeding duration are becoming more viable in terms of overall fertilizer program costs,” he says. “Bottom line is that managers are still going to have to promote growth and vigor for recovery.”

What does the future hold?

“This is anyone’s guess at this point but I don’t see it getting any better anytime soon,” Bigelow says. “The U.S. Department of Agriculture stats say that the average fertilizer prices that farmers paid in June 2008 were 77% higher than in June 2007. Now is certainly the time to carefully inventory each turf site and invest in soil testing. Information such as organic matter that influences the overall annual nitrogen requirement, as well as phosphorus and potassium levels may allow managers to further refine applications. Then they can apply more specific products to those areas truly needing some of these nutrients.”

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