

# Budget cutting

## Q&A



BY DR. GRADY MILLER

Professor, North  
Carolina State University

### Questions?

Send them to  
Grady Miller at  
North Carolina State University,  
Box 7620, Raleigh, NC 27695-  
7620, or email  
grady\_miller@ncsu.edu

Or, send your  
question to  
David Minner at  
Iowa State University, 106  
Horticulture Hall, Ames, IA 50011  
or email  
dminner@iastate.edu.

*I manage county parks and recreation fields. We have been blessed with good support and funding for the last several years. We have been putting out two applications of preemergence on most of our fields, one application on the less-used fields. We do spot spraying as needed. About one-third of our fields are hybrid bermudagrass and the rest are common bermudagrass. All the hybrid fields are irrigated as well as a few of the common bermudagrass fields. Most of the fields are a loam or heavy sand soil so we generally fertilize with 125 to 200 pounds N per acre each year along with about 100 pounds of potassium and 50 to 75 pounds of phosphorus. This year the hammer is starting to drop. We have had to lay off a few workers and I've been told to cut my other expenditures by 20%. We did not overseed any of our fields this year (normally we overseed the baseball/softball fields). We have been thinking about charging the local soccer leagues more to use the fields. The soccer leagues currently funds all the line painting, but otherwise pay no fees. Baseball and softball teams pay a small usage fee, which mostly goes toward paying someone to line the fields for games and a few miscellaneous supplies. Do you have any suggestions for how we can cut cost and still keep our fields in shape?*

North Carolina

Unfortunately, I think your situation is going to be common this year. As I do extension programs around the state, cost cutting measures seem to be the norm. I tell people that "there are ways to save money and there are ways to manage sports fields—they are not always mutually exclusive." But at some point, doing more with less is no longer possible. The loss of workers has a significant impact of what we can accomplish.

The success formula for a sports field is to start with a properly designed and constructed field. Then use good water management and maintenance practices. Combined with controlled use of the field, this should result in a good playing surface. It will be very important that as you forego certain maintenance practices, that you as a supervisor, keep an eye of the fields to ensure that they remain safe fields.

I think you can only cut out aspects of your maintenance program with consideration of the cost/benefit combined with a reasonable assessment of what you can accomplish with a reduced labor force. You did not mention the normal expenses you have for sod, equipment, equipment repair, irrigation supplies, energy (fuel and electricity), topdressing material, lime, infield mix, and miscellaneous sports supplies. These may or may not be part of your budget.

So, the basic issues discussed here will be mowing, fertilization, pest control, and aerification. Cutting out pre-emergence applications will certainly save you some money assuming that your weed pressure will be low

enough that spot spraying will give you acceptable weed control. I realize this is a slippery slope, since there will not likely be any funds available to do extensive spraying of post-emergence products. I would have more post-emergence products on hand because you are almost sure to need more. Also, realize since you did not overseed your fields, in North Carolina the bermudagrass will be completely dormant by mid-winter giving you the option of using glyphosate for post-emergence winter weed control.

With your heavy soil, keep your aerifications scheduled. It will be important to keep your surface compaction low to encourage good turf growth (to reduce weeds) and maintain a safe surface. Also, you did not mention your mowing height, but by mowing between 0.75 to 1.5 inches you maintain shoot density and keep your impact adsorption without negatively influencing play. If you go too high, shoot density declines and leaf blades are more prone to wear. But if you can grow your grass a little higher than before, perhaps you can stretch the mowing interval out a day or two. With a labor shortage this may go a long way. Also, to reduce the need to line your soccer fields as often, put some Primo in your paint per label recommendations. This will dramatically reduce the need to paint your fields.

Many turf managers have been forced to reduce their fertilization rates due to the skyrocketing price of fertilizer. With bermudagrass it is important that fertilizer not be totally eliminated from your maintenance program. Hybrid bermudagrass in particular will thin without fertilizer applications. This will increase weed encroachment and ultimately may result in a semi-bare, weedy field. I would suggest that you cut the area you fertilize on the field rather than cutting the rate across the entire surface. So, fertilize the high use areas at your current rate and then fertilize the lower use areas at a lower rate. This should allow you to cut your N fertilizer by at least 25%. I would go back to your soil test and determine how much P and K can be reduced. I suspect those could be easily reduced by 25 to 50%. Since North Carolina has no charge for soil analysis, it is an easy, inexpensive way to dial in your P and K needs.

Lastly, use frank and open communication with your user groups. To some extent you are all in this situation together. In terms of field use, traffic flow on your fields cost nothing and is an effective way to reduce worn areas on fields. Work with coaches to have drills off the field or rotate areas. User fees may also be effective to supplement your budget or even to limit field use. Regardless of economic times, hopefully we can maintain safe playing surfaces for our communities. The great coach John Wooden once said, "Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do." ■