



BY DR. GRADY MILLER

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Questions?

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We expect to have our field budgets reduced this year. How would you prioritize necessary practices and spending on turf product? I'm also not sure if we'll be allowed to keep a full crew, so labor may also be an issue. Thanks for your comments.

Fort Worth, TX

Well I am glad you are starting to plan before your budget is reduced. No person knows more about fields than the field manager that manages them, so you are the perfect person to prioritize practices and purchases needed to keep the field safe and useable.

If your fields were properly designed and constructed, received good maintenance in the past, and had controlled use during the season, you should be good shape this spring. Remember the ultimate goal of a good sports field is a field. Keep this in mind as you make management decisions, and keep reminding your supervisors that this is your priority when you are considering management and purchasing decisions.

Most field managers only have several variable expenses under their control. These generally include: labor, equipment purchases, equipment maintenance, fertilizer products, pesticides, paint, top-dressing sand, and sod/seed expenses. Energy (fuel, electricity, etc.) expenses are often not as easily controlled.

I believe the number one item that must stay in a management program in terms of field impact is nitrogen fertilization. Use your soil test to modify your non-nitrogen nutrient needs (e.g., phosphorus, potassium, calcium, etc.) so you do not buy something you do not need. Your field will need nitrogen fertilizer. It will maximize turf density and a denser field is a safer field. Plus it will recover from damage faster and density

discourages weeds encroachment. The rule of thumb is one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per growing month.

Price out your fertilizer products per pound of nutrient rather than per pound of product. And if you have available labor, you can often get better results by splitting the fertilizer applications and going out more frequently (e.g., half pound rates twice a month).

After fertilizer, keep a good mowing program. The more frequent you mow bermudagrass when it is actively growing the better the turf density. For bermudagrass keep the height of cut below 2 inches. For hybrid bermudagrass closer to 1 inch is much better. Too high and it will shade itself and density will begin to thin. Regular mowing also discourages broadleaf weeds from getting a foothold. And if you do have some weeds, the mowing makes them less noticeable.

The next most important item on the list should be weed control. You want to hear complaints about your field condition, have a weedy field. With the loss of MSMA herbicides, our inexpensive post-emergence grassy weed control options are now more limited. I think this swings the pendulum toward more emphasis on pre-emergence programs. Using a good pre-emergence program combined with a post-emergence broadleaf herbicide as needed, will maximize your maintenance dollars and will help ensure you have an attractive, safe field.

Do not forget aerification. A playable field is not rock-hard. An aerification can also reduce some weeds, discourage spring dead spot, reduce thatch, increase water infiltration, and improve plant stress tolerance. So, use whatever you have available for core aerification and do it as often as possi-

ble. I do not believe you can core aerify too often.

I think all the other management practices and products are secondary after these three. So be sure the resources are available and then schedule the above practices as priorities.

Of course all these practices require labor. If your labor force is reduced, there are a few management other practices you may want to consider. One idea is to use a plant growth regulator such as trinexapac ethyl (e.g., Primo Maxx, Governor, T-Nex) to suppress turf growth so less frequent mowing is needed. There is a product cost, but it is offset with reduced mowing and reduced equipment wear. It also will provide you with a denser, more wear tolerant turf. Along those same lines, there is a label rate for putting Primo Maxx in turf paint. This can dramatically reduce the need for re-painting your athletic field lines resulting in more labor savings.

Always be looking for inexpensive ways to save money. For instance, with soccer fields, move the sidelines and goals in or out to redistribute wear areas. Have open communication with the field user groups so they understand how they can improve the fields by moving their drills around the field. Look at leasing equipment. This can reduce downtime and allow you to use newer equipment with less capital outlay.

My last piece of advice is to go to meetings and learn how others are dealing with reduced budgets. Local, state, and national STMA meetings may be your greatest resource in solving your problems. I believe attending them is time and money well spent. ■