



**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 Horti-  
culture Hall, Ames, IA 50011  
or email  
dminner@iastate.edu.

*We keep hearing people say the expression, “the new normal”. In terms of sports turf management, what does that mean to you?*

*Missouri Turfgrass Meeting attendee*

I have also have been hearing this expression on a regular basis—almost always in reference to our current situation as a result of a poor economy. It has become so overused that I personally dislike the phrase almost as much as the now infamous, “We have to do more with less.”

First, let’s define normal. The statistician in me suggests that the word normal is an indirect reference to the concept of a normal distribution. A normal distribution is when there is an expect value (or a mean) around which there are observations distributed more or less equally below and above the mean. When looked at as a graph, the result is a “bell-shaped curve.” One standard deviation accounts for about 68% of the observations closest to the mean. Two standard deviations account for 95% of the observations. A new normal distribution could have different means and/or different standard deviations. So, basically a new norm would be an experience that is very different than before and/or an extreme experience well outside a typical expectation.

The shift in the norm may not have a direct cause. For instance there has been a domino effect in sports that has influenced the sports turf manager’s norm. The best examples related to budget reductions. In many cases game attendance at sporting events has suffered due to the economic situation of the fans. Some have either lost their jobs or have the threat of a lost job. The result is that many people are be spending a greater percentage of their household in-

come on food, clothing, and shelter and less on items viewed as non-essential. A significant drop in average attendance results in lower revenue, so field managers have seen budgets reduced in response to the new attendance average. The same may be true of in terms parents paying for their kids to participate in sports.

**The field manager is not the only one making tough decisions that may influence field quality. Companies that have turf products are experiencing the same types of economic shifts.**

Different types of “new normal” may be the extremes in weather many of you have experienced the last few years. The yearly climate averages across the US may not be that different but many areas have experienced extremes in temperature, drought, and flooding. So, the “new normal” concept may be applied to much more than just our economy.

I keep hearing people say, “I will go back to doing \_\_\_\_\_ when the economy gets better.” The blank may be filled with aerating, topdressing, weed control, etc. The problem is that if a sports field is to be maintained at a certain level of quality, it needs these practices regardless of the economy and weather. This new norm may really put the sports turf manager in a tough decision-making situation. A field manager still needs to provide a safe playing surface.

The field manager is not the only one making tough decisions

that may influence field quality. Companies that have turf products are experiencing the same types of economic shifts. Suppliers are selling lower quantities of products, so they have to make hard business decisions. For instance, the Gowan Company recently announced it would cease Rubigan sales on December 31, 2012. For many years Rubigan has been the go-to product for spring dead spot control and has been used for pre-emergence control of *Poa annua* on warm-season grasses. For Gowan Company this was strictly an economic decision based on reduced sales. Look for the disappearance of more products in the next few years.

There is also the Imprelis herbicide story from 2011. Imprelis was a great post-emergence product for controlling broadleaf weeds in turf-grasses. It was then linked to the death of thousands of Norway spruces, eastern white pines, and other selected tree species. The EPA forced its removal from the market. The liability was too great to keep it around. This situation will forever change the release of new products. One company representative told me to not expect any new herbicide products in the turf market for the next 10 years. This does not include generic products and older products re-labeled for use in turf.

So, these are just a few examples of shifts in what was considered normal. We will continue to have to adjust how we do our jobs, keeping our standards and user groups in mind. The often quoted American Senator Everett Dirksen once said, “I am a man of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times.” I believe that is an approach we should all consider adopting if we are to succeed with our new normal. ■