

Superintendent FEATURES

Above Water

Irrigation equipment manufacturers adapt to the changing times and needs of a golf industry hampered by a difficult economy.
By Larry Aylward

Golf course construction is at a standstill, and golf course maintenance budgets are tight. One would assume it's a trying time for irrigation equipment companies. It is, but those companies are rolling with the proverbial punches.

"The levels we're at, like the stock market, aren't what they used to be," says David Angier, senior marketing manager for Riverside, Calif.-based Toro Irrigation. "Nothing is a slam dunk anymore. However, there are many courses looking for ways to save water and money."

Steve Sakurai, the national golf sales manager for Phoenix-based Ewing Irrigation Products, says business has been better for the company, which distributes a line of products from Hunter Industries.

"It's picking up, but that's comparing it to a really bad year last year," Sakurai says.

When golf was rolling in the late 1990s, and courses were being built faster than Starbucks locations, irrigation equipment companies were selling plenty of million-dollar irrigation projects. But when the golf economy soured with the general economy in 2007, golf clubs began to shelve plans for new irrigation systems. Now irrigation equipment companies are adapting to the times and changing their focus. As a result, business is improving.



David Angier

The deferred maintenance dilemma

Thanks to the economic downturn, golf courses have been deferring irrigation maintenance the past few years. But many of the decision makers at these courses realize they can't put maintenance off much longer, lest other things start breaking down.

"How long can you keep your car running on bald tires before you have to do something about them?" asks Paul Roche, the national sales manager for Azusa, Calif.-based Rain Bird.

Irrigation systems on the thousands of golf courses built 10 to 20-plus years ago, many during the golf boom, now or soon will require upgrading or at least partial upgrading, from wiring to sprinklers to field satellites to central control software, Angier says.

"That's what's driving the business in the U.S. right now," Angier says.

Sakurai agrees.

"There will always be cars sold because they break down," he says. "It's the same thing with irrigation systems. They are going to break down, and it's going to cost too much money to just put Band-Aids on them. Soon, the cost of replacing and fixing things gets too high."

Improved Technology Needs to be More User Friendly, Superintendents Say

Golf course superintendents are always on the lookout for new technology to operate their irrigation systems more efficiently, which may equate to fewer dollars spent in this tough economy.

But some of the new technology may need to be more user friendly, says Kevin Breen, who's in his 15th season as golf course superintendent at Lahontan Golf Club in Truckee, Calif. Some superintendents don't utilize all the irrigation technology at their hands because they're not sure how to use it.



Paul Roche

"I'm always surprised by the number of courses that have the current versions of irrigation system software, and they only use 10 percent to 20 percent of the features they have on that system," Breen says.

Irrigation manufacturers may need to get involved to better educate superintendents on technology they could, and should, be using because they already have it, Breen adds.

"I don't think most superintendents take advantage of the technology that's out there, and it's because they have to invest a lot of time in figuring it out," Breen says.

Tom Alex, director of golf course maintenance for the Grand Cypress Golf Club in Orlando, Fla., agrees.

"The bells and whistles are nice as long as you can hear and see them," he says.

The technology can be confusing at times for superintendents, Alex says.

"It takes commitment and dedication to learn that technology in order to use it effectively," he adds.

-- Larry Aylward

Not surprisingly, bids for current irrigation projects are very competitive, Sakurai adds.



More superintendents want to control irrigation from hand-held devices, such as an iPad.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TORO IRRIGATION

"If anybody was going to do a project, now would be a good time to do it because you're not going to get better pricing, especially on labor," he says. "Contractors are hungry."

However, the size and scope of irrigation projects has changed. Golf course decision makers are no longer willing to pay for complete irrigation system renovations with all the bells and whistles. They're looking closely at what they can and can't live without as far as an irrigation renovation goes.

They might upgrade their control system, but if they can achieve adequate coverage for a few more years, they will postpone a renovation in that segment. In other words, they're doing much smaller and more piecemeal projects.

"We see the same wise investment in good infrastructure - pump stations, adequate coverage and pipe sizing - but the projects tend to be smaller," says Roche, who has been in the golf irrigation business for about 25 years, almost five years with Rain Bird. "We see them do renovations at nine holes at a time, and, in some cases, it's three or six holes at a time. Or it's just golf courses doing a control system upgrade, but knowing full well there may be a major renovation down the road where they will keep those controllers."



Soil sensors may continue to grow in use, even though some courses can't currently afford them.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TORO IRRIGATION

Angier says Toro Irrigation has instructed its distributors to shift their sales focus from selling entire systems to new courses to selling existing courses things like four cases of sprinklers or control system upgrades.

While different courses want and require different irrigation upgrades, Angier says Toro Irrigation representatives often hear superintendents asking what kind of upgrades they can get for \$10,000 or less.

"We hear that \$10,000 threshold a lot," he adds.

That said, Toro has seen an uptick in irrigation financing, Angier notes. Toro Irrigation offers 0 percent financing for 24 to 36 months on certain expenditures. For instance, a course could spend \$36,000 but make \$1,000 monthly payments for three years.

What they want

Golf course superintendents are trying to save water, energy and labor, Roche says. Rain Bird's focus has been to help them become more efficient with irrigation by suggesting they use certain products, such as soil sensors.

Rain Bird recently introduced the Integrated Sensor System, a multicomponent soil sensing system that provides accurate snapshots of soil conditions and the ability to automatically adjust irrigation system run times. "It provides superintendents a dashboard view of important parameters, such as moisture, temperature and salinity," Roche says.

Not every golf course can afford the soil sensor technology, Roche says. But he points out that courses can expand the number of soil sensors for much less than their initial investment.

"The cost of a lot of new technology is the cost to get in," Roche says. "The actual cost to expand it is fairly low. It's the initial step-off point that can be expensive."

Angier says that soil sensors - Toro offers Turf Guard Sensors - will continue to grow in use, even though some courses can't currently afford them. He expects more golf courses will try them, especially if they can buy them through special promotions (for instance, Toro offers a buy three get one free deal).

There are ways for golf courses to save money while upgrading irrigation technology. Regarding hydraulic sprinklers, a trend is for golf courses to replace the insides of 10- to 20-year old sprinklers with conversion assemblies rather than entire sprinklers, Angier says, noting that Certified Golf Course Superintendent Brian Powell at the Old Chatham Golf Club in Durham, N.C., reported a 25 percent water saving by upgrading his course's sprinkler internals.

"You can start to see some significant water and cost savings just by doing something like that and spending less than half of what it would cost to upgrade the entire sprinkler," he says.

Efficiency means everything to superintendents when it comes to irrigation. Angier says many Toro Irrigation customers are converting to Toro's Lynx Control System, which combines all essential irrigation information in a single, intuitive interface, where it's always readily available. Superintendents can instantly access relevant course management information - past, present or planned - from multiple sources, including weather stations, pump stations, electrical systems, sprinklers, intelligent field controllers and soil sensors. Then superintendents can irrigate more efficiently while saving time, reducing labor costs and even lowering electricity use.

Rain Bird's Integrated Control (IC) System has also garnered superintendents' interest because of its efficiency, Roche says. The IC System is built into the rotor and valve for easy, streamlined control. It connects the central control directly to the rotor or valve.

"The integration of the sprinkler head with the control system just seems like the next logical step to a lot of superintendents in the evolution of a golf course irrigation system," Roche says. "Efficiency is the name of the game."

The outlook

Sakurai expects Ewing's business to be much of the same in 2012.

"There are still a lot of courses that have put things off for so long that they have to do something," Sakurai says. "That's the bulk of what we saw this year, and it will continue next year."

Angier agrees and says golf courses will still be looking for incremental ways to upgrade irrigation systems.

"They won't be spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, and they will pick things they can show a return on and show justification to their membership or ownership for doing it," Angier says."

Product innovation will fuel irrigation business, especially if it helps golf courses save money.

"We have to keep innovating," Roche says. "Superintendents want new technology to make their lives easier and to save on water, energy and labor."

Despite the tough economic conditions, Angier says it's an exciting time to be in the irrigation business.

"Water as a scarce resource is only going to get worse," he says.

That leaves it up to the irrigation equipment companies to invent even more ways to save it.

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