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FLORIDA LOWE DOWN

Recent happenings and observations from Florida golf courses

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El Niño is No Bueno for Florida Golf Courses!

Lessons learned from previous El Niño's may help you weather the 2027 "Super" El Niño storm

El Niño is No Bueno for Florida Golf Courses!

Dealing with difficult weather can be a challenge for golf course superintendents. Florida superintendents must produce excellent turf quality during colder winter months…with "warm" season grasses. This can be difficult with perfect weather, as low soil temperature limits turf growth and recovery and lower evapotranspiration in winter encourages saturated soils.

El Niño winters bring extended cooler and/or wetter conditions to the southern U.S. Some El Niño's, such as the 2024 El Niño, only moderately increased rainfall, while others were much more severe.

In 1998 and 2016, aggressive El Niño's plagued many Florida golf courses and caused superintendent turnover. Hopefully, more superintendents will prepare early and learn from the conditions caused by previous strong El Niño's. This 2027 "Super" El Nino is already bringing steady rainfall and reduced sunlight from daily cloud coverage and will most likely eclipse previous El Niño's.

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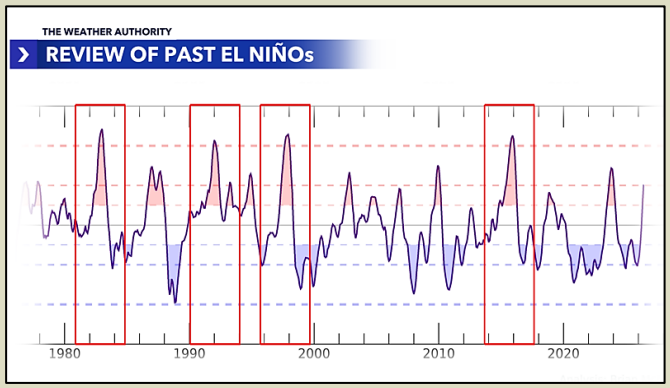
Wetter Conditions

El Niño winters bring increased rainfall. In fact, the most recent strong El Niño of 2016 brought nearly 6X normal rainfall in January. Zach Maloch, WINK News Meteorologist, and I recently discussed El Niño's impacts on South Florida at a Calusa GCSA event and the graph below from that presentation shows annual rainfall during previous El Niño's, in red boxes (see Strongest El Niños have delivered some of Southwest Florida's wettest winters).



Increased rainfall during El Niño winters creates saturated soil conditions, causing problems on golf courses, including:

- Shorter roots
- Reduced turf health/growth
- Larger ballmarks (due to shorter roots)
- Decreased surface firmness on greens
- Tire rutting on fairways and roughs
- More fairway mud balls/plugged lies
- More root diseases
- Poor turf color from weeks of cloudy weather and cart traffic (see below)

Colder Conditions

Warm-season grasses thrive during periods of warmer weather, and turf growth decreases considerably when nighttime temperatures drop below 60 F.

Mechanical wear stress is particularly injurious on slow-growing turf, especially on greens that are rolled repetitively and/or mowed at lower heights.

New and aggressively managed greens are more susceptible to winter wear stress due to decreased organic "padding" (see previous June newsletter). Perimeters, steep contours, pinch points and fronts/backs of greens are particularly vulnerable to wear stress and can thin out in winter.

January 2016 was a busy month for me, as I visited Florida golf courses with struggling greens, and many were new putting greens.

Corrective measures should take place well before turf thinning occurs, since turf may not recover this winter. Consider increasing mowing heights on greens and reduce rolling or implement "target rolling". Alternating mowing with rolling also helps alleviate mechanical wear stress on greens.

Please don't hesitate to reach out early, should you feel the need. Also, the following articles can help shed light on this subject:

- 2024 YouTube Video
- 2024 Florida Green Article
- 2016 Green Section Article
- 2016 2nd Green Section Article
- 1998 Florida Green Article

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