



## MTESP: A HOLE-IN-ONE FOR GOLF COURSES

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**F**or the past eight years, an innovative, voluntary Michigan program—the *Michigan Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program (MTESP)*—has been working to step up management practices to help golf courses be environmental leaders within their community. The program is dedicated to protecting groundwater and surface water resources by advancing turfgrass management practices, preventing pollution, and increasing regulatory compliance within the golf industry. With over 800 golf courses in Michigan covering almost 96,000 acres, the potential “acreage of impact” is immense. Michigan residents are the ultimate benefactors of such a program to protect and enhance

our natural resources. Golfers can help by encouraging their course to join, or by choosing to spend their dollars at MTESP member courses.

Michigan State University (MSU) launched the program at the request of the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation (MTF), a non-profit organization that promotes the visibility and practice of environmental stewardship for turf managers. MSU worked with the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) and Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) to develop the program’s curriculum. The program has also partnered with the Golf Association of Michigan (GAM) and the Michigan Golf Course Owners Association (MGCOA)



Forest Dunes GC, certified in 2005

*"Water has been a hot topic in Michigan and now the golf industry will have a means to demonstrate sound management of this precious resource."*

to ensure the message is heard by all stakeholders. The program's origins are relatively unique, explains Debbie Swartz, an environmental specialist in the MDA who coordinates the program. "It's an industry-driven program; industry came to the state and said they wanted to be proactive and to learn how to be in compliance."

Because their livelihood depends on the quality of the course environment, all golf course managers and superintendents want to administer the grounds so that the water, wildlife and surrounding natural resources are minimally impacted. "I love the stewardship program," said Sean O'Connor, superintendent of the Forest Akers Golf Course at MSU. "I feel the expertise in the program helps me balance the demands of the golfers with the environment. We have a very well educated clientele that can appreciate the types of issues that are addressed in the program."

"There are great incentives for golf courses to be environmentally proactive," said Debbie Swartz. "Golf courses that become involved have access to tremendous resources that support specific

goals established for each property. Once certified, superintendents have a great sense of pride and comfort knowing they are in compliance with environmental laws and regulations. And, to keep their mind at ease and meet future needs, we combine information gathered from surveys with research conducted on campus to deliver new educational materials and services."

The stewardship program includes a series of educational modules that golf course superintendents review during introductory workshops. After attending the workshops, superintendents go back to their courses and conduct an environmental assessment, which includes mapping all natural resources on the property (wetlands, ponds, forested areas, etc.) and all potential sources of contamination, including pesticide and fertilizer storage and handling areas. The superintendents also map fuel storage areas, wellhead locations, shop areas, equipment washing stations, and soil and compost piles. The location of each item is considered in relation to the location of natural resources. They then receive a site visit from Swartz, or one of her colleagues,

who reviews the assessment and helps superintendents develop a three-year environmental action plan. This action plan spells out policies, procedures, practices, and goals for improvements and upgrades at the course. Action plans also enhance communication among course stakeholders about long-term management needs. Once the action plan is completed, the golf course achieves MTESP certification. A program staff member must re-evaluate a golf course every three years for the facility to retain its certification. Currently, 64 golf courses are MTESP-certified, and more than 220 Michigan courses are in the program.

Participating in the MTESP offers many benefits. MTESP staff members interpret and prioritize important laws and regulations impacting golf courses, and they help participating courses determine if they are in compliance. The program is confidential and does not report non-compliant courses; rather, MTESP staff members continue to work with the courses to make improvements until they do comply. Program staff members identify and map the natural resources on each golf

Arcadia Bluffs GC,  
member course,  
soon to be certified.



course, and identify protective measures that can be applied to environmentally sensitive areas. Furthermore, MTESP keeps members informed about the latest environmental issues, innovative management practices, and news involving the turfgrass industries. The MTESP hosts a workshop series every year to introduce new golf course representatives to the program, and to highlight special topics such as "Green Buying" and "Energy Conservation and Waste Reduction." MTESP also provides publicity and marketing opportunities, including recognition of courses' environmental achievements at high-profile community events such as golf tournaments.

"We continue to expand the program into areas that will keep superintendents a step ahead and recognized as environmental leaders," Swartz said. "For example, we're developing best management practices for irrigation to provide our members with a way to achieve and document the most effective and efficient use of water. Water has been a hot topic in Michigan and now the golf industry will have a means to demonstrate sound management of this precious resource."

"With all of the environmental challenges golf course superintendents deal with on a daily basis, I wouldn't be comfortable managing the property for the people that own this club without the Michigan Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program," said Steve Hammon, superintendent of the Traverse City Golf and Country Club. "The resources that are available to assist me are incredible. How could you afford not to be a member of the MTESP when staff members from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Michigan State University faculty members manage and administer the program?"

Many courses use their "Certified Environmental Steward" status as part of their marketing package. For example, the 900+ acre Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, in Acme, Michigan, plans to highlight its certification in newsletters, in correspondence to the resort's private condominium owners, and at golf trade shows. Paul Galligan is the resort's golf course superintendent. He has participated in the MTESP for eight years, and achieved certification for the resort's three courses in January 2006. "Being involved

in this program is the best day of work you can provide your employer; it makes golf course superintendents know how they can impact the environment and how they can lessen those impacts. For me, just knowing I've done the right thing is worth it."

The natural resources of this state belong to our children. Do your part to ensure the legacy by supporting businesses that protect the environment. Event planners can consider a certified property for your next conference or meeting venue. Resource and environmental protection is key for the superintendent that participates in the MTESP and by supporting these properties your group or event contributes to protecting Michigan's valuable natural resources. Plan your next round or golf outing at a Michigan Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program member course! ♣

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