



# TURFGRASS AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH ONLINE

USING SCIENCE TO BENEFIT GOLF



Scientists at Oklahoma State University tested the effectiveness of constructed P-removal structures to reduce the amount of phosphorus discharged into surface waters. After five months, the P-removal structure captured 25% of the total P load entering the structure.

**Volume 11, Number 2**  
February 1, 2012

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The purpose of *USGA Turfgrass and Environmental Research Online* is to effectively communicate the results of research projects funded under USGA's Turfgrass and Environmental Research Program to all who can benefit from such knowledge. Since 1983, the USGA has funded more than 450 projects at a cost of \$31 million. The private, non-profit research program provides funding opportunities to university faculty interested in working on environmental and turf management problems affecting golf courses. The outstanding playing conditions of today's golf courses are a direct result of ***using science to benefit golf***.

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# Improving Water Quality with Phosphorus Removal Structures

Chad Penn, Greg Bell, Jason Warren, and Josh McGrath

## SUMMARY

The transport of phosphorus (P) from soils to surface waters is a major cause of eutrophication. Phosphorus is often the limiting nutrient preventing algal blooms to surface water, so any method to prevent runoff containing phosphorus to surface waters is environmentally important. One potential solution to this problem is through the use of various industrial byproducts that are rich in P-sorbing minerals. These materials (phosphorus-sorbing materials; PSMs) are able to react with dissolved P and remove it from solution preventing transport. A P-removal structure was constructed on the property of Stillwater Country Club, Stillwater, OK, to test whether it could be effective in removing dissolved P from golf course runoff. Results of the study include:

- During the first five months of operation there were 54 total runoff events, the majority of which were irrigation-induced. Dissolved P concentrations in irrigation runoff originating from nearby putting greens were typically between 0.3 and 0.5 mg L<sup>-1</sup>, while rainfall induced runoff events were normally 0.5 to 1.3 mg L<sup>-1</sup>.
- After five months, the P-removal structure captured 25% of the total P load entering the structure.
- As expected, the removal efficiency of the structure was highest at the beginning (near 100%) then decreased with additional P inputs.
- Phosphorus removal efficiency was greater for the low-flow irrigation-induced runoff events compared to rainfall-induced events.
- A model was developed that can be used to determine how much of a particular P-sorbing material is necessary for removing a targeted P load at a particular site.

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*USGA Turfgrass and Environmental Research Online* 11(2):1-6.

TGIF Record Number: 196992

The transport of phosphorus (P) from soils to surface waters is a major cause of eutrophication. Eutrophication results in algal blooms, excessive aquatic plant growth, low dissolved oxygen levels, and potential fish kills. Phosphorus is more important than nitrogen in this regard because P is the most limiting nutrient for aquatic life.

There are two main forms of P, particulate P and dissolved P, which are transported to surface waters via surface runoff and subsurface flow. Particulate P is that which is sorbed onto soil particles. It is not 100% available after it reaches a water body. Controlling erosion eliminates particulate P transport. Dissolved P is 100% bio-available upon reaching a water body and erosion control does little for reducing its movement. Controlling dissolved P losses from suburban and urban landscapes is especially challenging when soil P accumulates due to several years of P fertilization beyond plant needs. Even after cessation of P fertilization and implementation of traditional best management practices, dissolved P will continue to “leak out” of high P soils for many years.



**Figure 1.** The uncompleted phosphorus removal structure shown during construction.

Some examples of phosphorus-sorbing materials include acid mine drainage residuals from the coal mining industry, drinking water residuals from municipalities, flu gas de-sulfurization gypsum from the power production industry, and steel slag from steel production. Specifically, P can be directly removed from runoff and drainage waters through the use of a P-removal structure containing a phosphorus-sorbing material (1). These structures can be strategically placed in “hot spots” or drainage ditches where runoff with elevated concentrations of dissolved P is likely. The P-removal structure intercepts runoff or subsurface drainage and channels it through contained phosphorus-sorbing materials. After the phosphorus-sorbing materials become saturated with P, they can be replaced with new PSMs, thereby effectively removing P from the watershed.

An ideal phosphorus-sorbing material should be locally available, inexpensive (or free), able to sorb P quickly, have high hydraulic conductivity, and be safe in regards to potential pollu-

tants such as sodium (Na), trace metals, and various organic compounds. Generally, materials that are rich in calcium (Ca), aluminum (Al), and iron (Fe) are potential PSMs. For a Ca-rich phosphorus-sorbing material to be effective, it needs to be well buffered to a pH above 6, and the Ca must be soluble in water. These conditions are necessary to precipitate Ca phosphates effectively and quickly. Phosphorus-sorbing materials containing Al and Fe minerals must not be coated, and the pH must not be excessively high ( $> 8.5$ ) for them to effectively sorb P by a process known as “ligand exchange”.

After studying many phosphorus-sorbing materials and conducting laboratory and pilot scale experiments, we constructed a P-removal structure on the property of Stillwater Country Club, Stillwater, OK (Superintendent, Jared Wooten). The P-removal structure (Figure 1) was placed at the outlet of a 150-acre suburban watershed (Figure 2) which consisted of approximately 35, 50, and 15% residential, undeveloped, and golf course area, respectively.



**Figure 2.** Location of the phosphorus removal structure (green dot) at the outlet of the 150-acre mixed residential and undeveloped watershed (outlined in red) in Stillwater, OK.



**Figure 3.** The completed phosphorus removal structure filled with steel slag, a by-product of the steel production industry. Close up of steel slag is shown in lower-right inset.

Two irrigated golf greens were located within 300 to 400 ft. from the structure. The greens were regularly irrigated as necessary, and this irrigation sometimes produced runoff that reached the structure. The structure was located in a drainage ditch immediately on the downstream side of a drainage culvert (Figure 3) where all water exited the watershed via a concrete trapezoidal bar ditch maintained by the City of Stillwater. The bar ditch drained directly into Stillwater Creek. Some runoff entered the structure by flowing along the side of the culvert into the structure inlet. Runoff entered the structure through several 2-inch diameter pipes connected to buried perforated pipe for evenly distributing the water throughout the phosphorus-sorbing materials. The water could then infiltrate through the bed of PSMs and drain out through the 4-inch diameter outlet.

The phosphorus-sorbing material selected for this 8 x 10 ft. structure was electric arc furnace steel slag that was sieved to  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch in size in order to ensure a high hydraulic conductivity, thereby

treating as much water as possible. Although the finer size fraction of the slag is more effective at sorbing dissolved P, a pilot-scale study showed that the non-sieved slag was prone to clogging. However, after observing the system for several months, it is probable that we could have used a smaller size fraction than  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch for improved P sorption without greatly compromising hydraulic conductivity.

Three tons of slag was placed in the structure to a depth of 8 to 9 inches. Flow rate measurements and samples were collected during runoff events using ISCO automatic samplers at the structure inlet and outlet. Using both P concentration and flow rate data we were able to calculate the mass of P (P load) entering the structure and the P load removed by the structure. It is important to evaluate P losses as loads rather than concentrations only.

After delivery to a water body, the dissolved P concentration in the body will be a function of the total P load in the water/sediments and the volume of water in the body. This concentra-

	Rainfall runoff events	Irrigation runoff events	All runoff events
Number of runoff events	20	34	54
Maximum flow rate (L min <sup>-1</sup> )	506	47	506
Weighted average flow rate (L min <sup>-1</sup> )	30.3	11.5	29.8
Weighted average retention time (min)	18.9	50	19.3
Maximum runoff P concentration (mg L <sup>-1</sup> )	1.61	0.97	1.61
Flow weighted runoff P concentration (mg L <sup>-1</sup> )	0.59	0.44	0.50
Total P input to structure (mg kg <sup>-1</sup> )	92.1	10.7	102.8
Total P removed by structure (mg kg <sup>-1</sup> )	19.3	6.6	25.9

**Table 1.** Summary of the suburban phosphorus (P) removal structure performance over the first 5 months of operation.

tion can vary annually and with season. Consider that a large volume of runoff water with a low P concentration can potentially deliver a greater P load than a small volume of runoff water with a high P concentration. For this reason, comparing P concentrations can be misleading. Regulatory agencies are more interested in P loads, for example, total maximum daily loads (TMDLs).

During the first five months of operation there were 54 total runoff events, the majority of which were irrigation induced (Table 1). Dissolved-P concentrations in irrigation runoff originating from nearby putting greens were typically between 0.3 and 0.5 mg L<sup>-1</sup>, while rainfall induced runoff events were normally 0.5 to 1.3 mg L<sup>-1</sup>. Most of the rainfall-induced runoff was produced from the residential areas outside the golf course. Rainfall-induced runoff events also delivered the majority of dissolved P loads to the structure (90% of total P load delivered to structure) compared to golf course irrigation events .

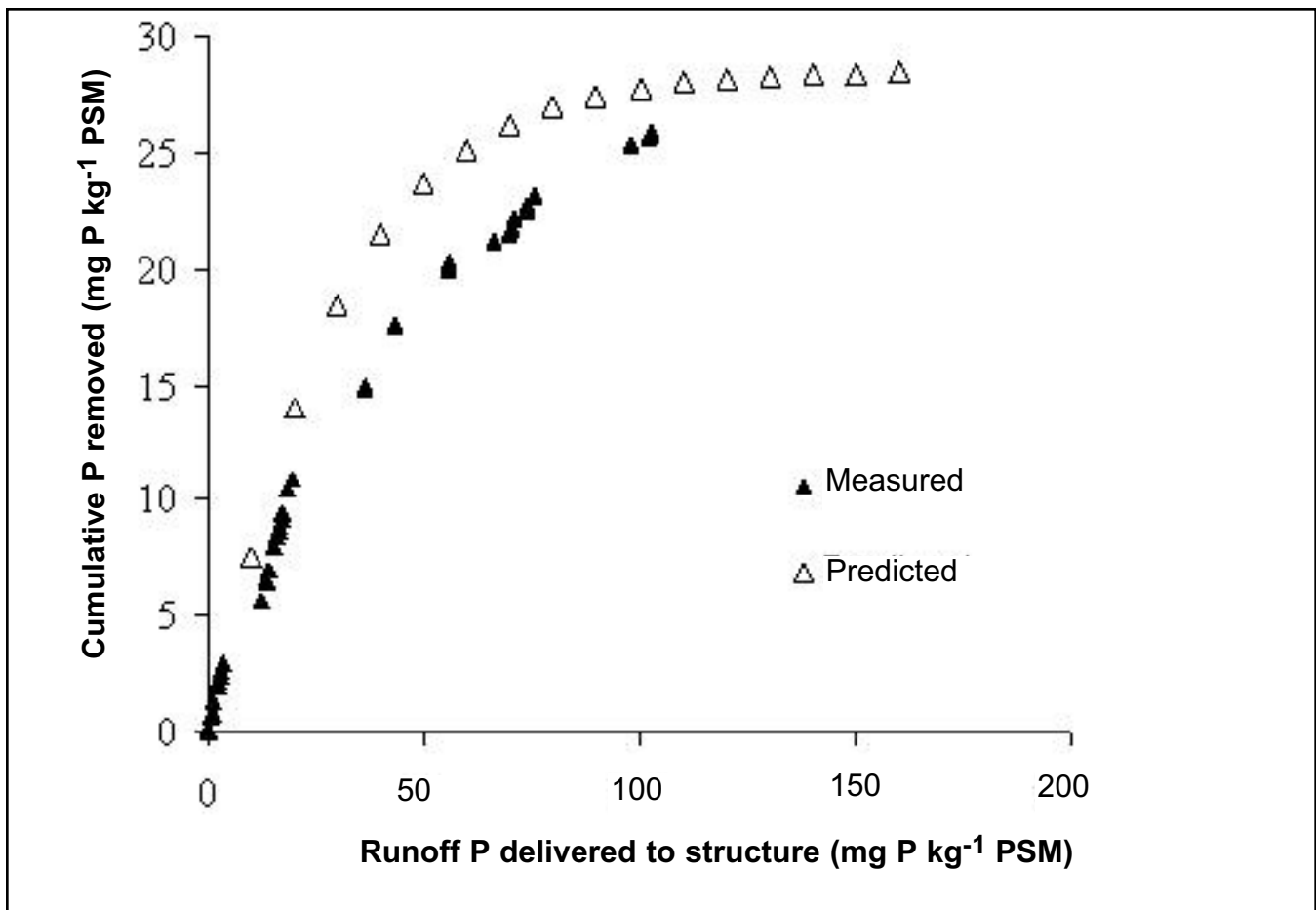
After five months, the P-removal structure captured 25% of the total P load entering the structure (Table 1). As expected, the removal efficiency of the structure was highest at the beginning (near 100%), then decreased with additional P inputs. Phosphorus removal efficiency was greater for the low-flow irrigation-induced runoff events compared to rainfall-induced events.

The lower flow rate of the irrigation events resulted in a greater retention time (i.e. the time of

contact between runoff water and PSMs) compared to rainfall events (Table 1). Retention time is calculated as the total pore space divided by flow rate. In fact, we found a significant relationship between retention time and P removal efficiency. The P removal efficiency of steel slag increased with increasing retention time. However, this is not true for all materials. Some PSMs sorb P so quickly that they do not respond to changes in retention time (4).

We conducted numerous laboratory flow-through P-sorption experiments on 14 different PSMs and developed a user-friendly model to aid in designing P-removal structures. The result is a “universal model” that can predict P removal and longevity of any PSM as a function of inflow P concentrations, flow volumes, retention time, and characteristics of the PSM. The model was successful at predicting the performance (P load removal and longevity) of the Stillwater structure (Figure 4). In addition, this model can be used to determine how much of a particular P-sorbing material is necessary for removing a targeted P load at a particular site.

It is important to keep in mind that the Stillwater structure was a proto-type. Using the previously mentioned model, if the goal was to remove 60% of the P load instead of 25%, then the structure could have simply been built to a larger size to accommodate 17 tons of sieved steel slag. On the other hand, based on laboratory experi-



**Figure 4.** Measured and predicted cumulative phosphorus (P) removal by the P-removal structure after five months of operation, as a function of P loading to the P-sorbing materials (PSMs). The PSM utilized for this structure was steel slag sieved to ¼ inch.

ments with non-sieved slag, only 500 lbs. of material would be necessary to remove 60% of the dissolved P load. However, the non-sieved slag is likely to exhibit poor hydraulic conductivity. Future research is required to determine the steel slag size fraction that achieves the ideal balance between maximum P sorption and hydraulic conductivity.

Phosphorus-removal structures should be designed to be free-draining, especially if Fe-rich P-sorbing materials are utilized. Stagnant water may induce Fe reduction and potential release of previously sorbed P. Also, P-removal structures should only be constructed in areas with high dissolved-P concentrations. The reason for this is because many PSMs are less effective when P concentrations in runoff are less than 0.2 mg L<sup>-1</sup>. Ultimately, structures can have a variety of designs. They do not have to resemble the box structure displayed in Figures 1 and 3. The keys

to successfully constructing a P-removal structure are use of a suitable amount of effective PSM, water flow through the PSM, and containment of the PSM.

When the P-sorbing material is no longer able to remove P, it can be removed from the structure and replaced with fresh material. The spent PSM may be suitable as a P fertilizer applied elsewhere, depending on the PSM utilized, or it may simply make a good soil amendment. For the ¼-inch sized slag used in our structure, we intend to test the ability of the material to serve as landscape mulch.

#### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank USGA's Turfgrass and Environmental Research Program for providing funding for this project.

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