

Starting with an Open Hand: Working with Regulators and Legislators

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When dealing with regulators, most industries tend to do the minimum to meet compliance issues and then attempt to stay under the radar. To handle legislative issues the public tends to protest or “Occupy Downtown.” Regulators want help doing their jobs. In Georgia, the golf industry asked the hard question: “What can we do to help conserve water that proves we are good managers/stewards of the resource?” Change is difficult but the golf industry stepped up to prove the world wrong using a self-policing BMP program, stepping up to work with agencies on various committees and introducing educational pieces.

In Georgia a sequence of events and perceptions of the Golf Industry led to regulations that sought to restrict Golf’s use of water. Furthermore during times of extreme limited resource golf courses were restricted to greens only watering. To protect the business and environment of golf, the industry took action to increase understanding changing the perceptions and hopefully reduce the restrictions that threatened the businesses.

Droughts in the late 80’s kick started the regulatory process for water management in Georgia. Golf Courses began permitting water use and in some cases reporting. The late 90’s brought more drought and more problems. Downstream states (Alabama and Florida) sued Georgia to ensure the water released from Lake Lanier in north Georgia made it downstream and was not used by citizens in Atlanta. Facing the loss of water use in several water basins the State of Georgia began working to produce strict drought rules. The rules went to public comment with golf restricted even during non-drought times and Public water providers holding the largest burden of water conservation. Both industries came out opposed to the regulations. Golf had the hardest time working with the regulators as the “Green Industry” had negotiated the rule content as spokesman for the golf industry as we had chosen to work with them on advocacy. Of course Golf could no longer permit someone else to negotiate in its behalf. After some negotiating by representatives from the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association, the rules were softened a little with promises on both sides to work together in the future.

Perceptions of golf simply made it hard to start working from a level playing field. For example, the Agriculture community felt that golf used too much water and therefore Agriculture would not support the industry. Golf and Agriculture had worked together in the past on regulatory issues such as posting of pesticide applications. In a Department of Natural Resources Board meeting Senator John Bulloch, Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, questioned “Do you want water for food or for fun?” This was a direct reference to golf’s efforts to retain its water use and to distance Agriculture from golf. At first regulators in the

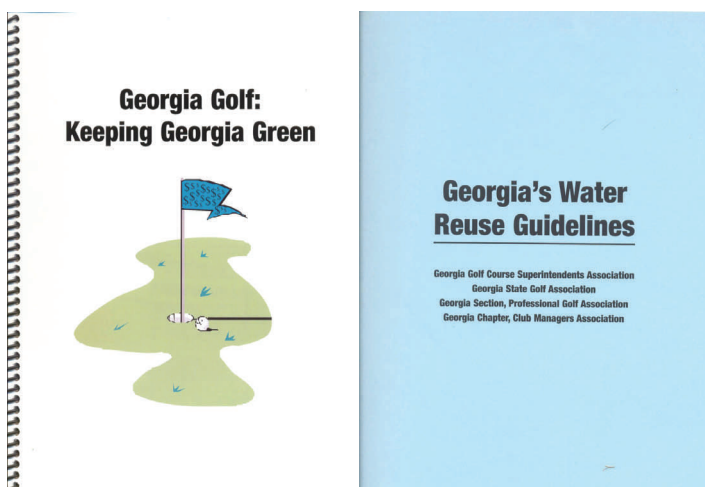
Figure 1. The Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association received an accommodation from the governor for their efforts to reduce water use in Georgia.



state thought that golf used only potable water and or raw water supplied by a water provider. This was an inaccurate perception because only 1% of golf was utilizing potable water and most using surface impoundment or underground sources. Finally, legislators felt golf was a hot topic that was better left below the radar. Education was the answer.

Actions started with all industry partners assembling to form the Allied Golf Council. This group included the Club Managers, PGA professionals, the State Golf Association and the Superintendents. It was agreed that water was essential for the industry and a task force formulated. The task force produced educational pieces to be distributed to regulators and legislators. The environmental benefits of golf and the economic impact of golf were included in the documents. Golf in Georgia has a three billion dollar impact on the state’s economy while using only 0.5 percent of the state’s total water resource. A lobby firm was engaged by the task force to help engage legislators as this was not a strength of the volunteers. Subject matter experts – golf course superintendents – were inserted into various regulatory committees such as Water Conservation and Water Reuse. These superintendents dispelled myths about golf course water use. The final effort to help educate and change perceptions was the Memorandum of Agreement between the Georgia Environmental Protection Division of the Department of Natural Resources and the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association.

Figure 2. A “Water Task Force” was formed that included golf course owners, managers, professionals and superintendents. Several positive publications dealing with golf and water issues were pro-



The Memorandum of Agreement between the Georgia EPD and the GGCSA stated that 75% of the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association member courses in Georgia would be on Best Management Practices for Water Conservation by May of 2007. Although the agreement allowed 3 years to attain the goal, extreme effort was utilized to make sure the goal was reached. The Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association held classes, sent forms with self-addressed stamped envelopes and even sent teams of experts to help courses complete their Best Management Practices documents. In May of 2007 the GGCSA had 93% of the courses on the program and currently exceed that number. This program was an open hand self-policing effort to help educate the State that golf courses use water efficiently.

The Best Management Practices for Water Conservation for golf in Georgia was done without any guarantee of a return for easing of restrictions or recognition from legislators. However, starting the program with an open hand and knowing that we were helping the community the BMP program should help in any future efforts to negotiate water rules. In 2007 drought restrictions hit level 4 which restricted golf to “Greens Only.” Because of the effort to educate, work with and not against authorities golf was granted an Executive Order from Dr. Carol Couch the EPD Director during the drought of 2007 easing restrictions on golf thereby saving the industry. The Executive Order reduced the almost total water ban to a 35% reduction. Also, then Governor Sonny Perdue gave the golf industry a commendation for water conservation. Golf was the only industry to receive the recognition. When water conservation legislation was passed in 2010 under Governor Sonny Perdue golf was exempt from restrictions. Currently the Environmental Protection Division of the Department of Natural Resources is writing new drought rules working with the golf industry to use science based calculations to reduce water use utilizing 30 year averages from water stations around the state and crop coefficients. The State is using the BMP program as a template for other industries.

Starting with an open hand and trying to work with regulators and legislators was not the normal way to do business in Georgia. Most industries fight change. Changing for the golf industry was hard business as well. There was a lot of heavy lifting by volunteers and the cost of the program reached tens of thousands of dollars. Even though there was no guarantee of success, the results were fantastic and solid relationships were built.