



September 16, 2008

Smart scalping can reduce allergy woes

By Marcel Honoré

'Tis lawn scalping season.

Each fall, Coachella Valley golf courses, parks and lawns are stripped of their Bermuda grass and replanted with winter rye grass — an annual local ritual that irritates asthma and allergy sufferers. But many valley cities and agencies are taking steps to help minimize their suffering, and some hope to expand efforts.

Lawn scalping releases dust and pollen into the air in the valley, a place where dust pollution already is considered the area's worst environmental problem.

"When you get into asthma, you're talking about the ability to breathe," said Eileen Packer, executive director of the Health Assessment Resource Center, a nonprofit group that surveys local health data.

Nearly 48,000 people in eastern Riverside County suffer from asthma, HARC found in 2007.

Those with asthma — and allergies and other respiratory illnesses — can end up in the emergency room during this time of year, local hospital and government officials say.

At Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs, emergency room visits for respiratory illness spiked 5 percent during the fall of 2006 and 2007, said Michael Connors, a registered nurse in the hospital's Department of Infection Prevention.

Most of the patients blamed scalping for their visit, and Connors said they're probably right.

Some local golf courses and municipalities are taking steps to help clear the fall air.

In 2000, valley golf courses launched a "smart scalping" effort to reduce over-seeding's environmental effects.

To "smart scalp," maintenance crews gradually stop watering the Bermuda grass and then dampen it with water right before it is removed, said Aurora Wilson, director of the Coachella Valley Association of Governments' Community Resources Department.

When the technique was first tested in 2000 at the Springs golf course in Rancho Mirage, scalping dust released over the test area was reduced by 90 percent, Wilson said.

Since then, about two-thirds of the valley's 124 golf courses have implemented smart scalping to reduce the allergens released in the air, she said.

This year, valley agencies are trying to add more private landscapers to the mix.

All Coachella Valley cities except La Quinta have passed an ordinance that encourages landscapers to use smart scalping techniques.

The ordinance, which CVAG approved in July 2007, requires landscapers to attend a free, two-hour course on smart scalping before they can renew their city business license.

Indian Wells does not issue landscaping licenses, but in place of the CVAG ordinance, the city offers a subsidy to landscapers that use smart scalping techniques, city management analyst Susan

Weisbart said.

La Quinta officials did not return calls for comment Monday.

While the ordinance encourages landscapers to use smart scalping alternatives, it does not require them to do so, Wilson said.

Elected officials on CVAG's Energy and Environmental Committee discussed whether to mandate smart-scalping, but "chose to see if educating the landscapers would result in a voluntary change," Wilson said.

The ordinance also misses smaller "mom-and-pop" landscaping companies that don't seek city business licenses, but Wilson hoped other landscapers and customers would apply "peer pressure" for the smaller outfits to use smart scalping.

CVAG officials plan to study how effective the new city ordinances are after the scalping season ends in October, Wilson said.
