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Altering Perceptions

Arizona alliance combats myths about golf's water use

By Everett Munez

It's July in Arizona and the heat is oppressive, a brutal 110 degrees. A driver with his air conditioning on full blast looks out his car window as the brown desert gives way to lush, green grass. It's a golf course, and the sprinklers are on. The driver, a non-golfer, frowns. Surely so much of this water is being wasted, he thinks.

The Arizona Alliance for Golf wants to flip this belief on its head.

"We need to convince the 90 percent of people who drive around and see the sprinklers to look and say, 'Oh. That's a good thing,'" said Mike Petty, the alliance's communications director.

Founded in 2020, the Arizona Alliance for Golf seeks to protect the game in Arizona while educating golfers and non-golfers alike about golf's benefits. Golfers and clubs aren't the only beneficiaries. Add restaurants, tourism, small businesses and the state as a whole to the list.

To spread its message and influence legislation, the alliance has to combat the misconceptions many have about golf, especially about water usage.

“Golf has been foundational to the development of cities like Scottsdale and to Arizona’s identity,” said Katie Prendergast, the alliance’s executive director. “It’s important we combat misinformation about how much water the industry actually uses.”

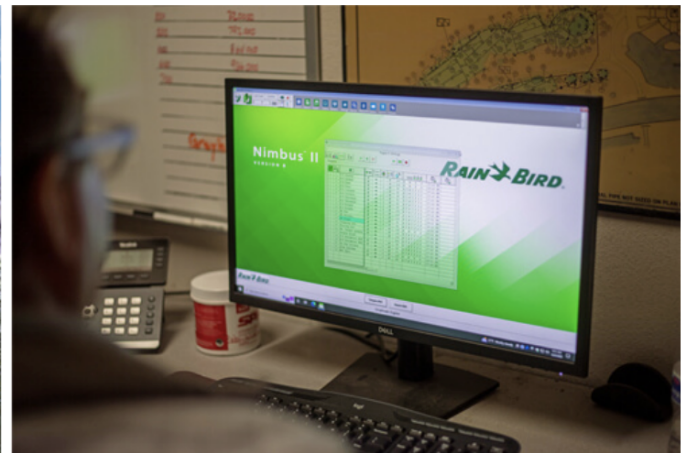
Before the alliance was founded, it was primarily golf course superintendents fighting for water on the legislative level. Ernie Pock, the director of agronomy at Grayhawk Golf Club, has been in the profession for almost 35 years. He is the current president of the Cactus and Pine Chapter of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, a chapter that was co-founded by his grandfather in the 1950s.

Pock says he became president of the chapter partly because of the water debates. He wanted to help combat common public misconceptions.

“Our biggest misconception is that they think green grass is tied to overwatering,” Pock said. “We can manipulate our grass color with fertility needs, like with more iron and nitrogen loads.”

There is actually an incentive not to use a lot of water, as it’s one of a golf course’s biggest expenses. Between the two courses at Grayhawk, Pock says they spend around a million dollars a year on water. Therefore, the emphasis is on efficiency, and advanced technology helps with this.

Golf courses have weather stations that, based on the weather for the day, tell the irrigation software how much and how long each individual sprinkler should water. On the rare occasions in Arizona when it rains, the system determines the amount of rainfall and adjusts how much water, if any, is needed. Water usage also varies by season, and Pock says about 50 percent of Grayhawk’s water allocation is used in the hot months of June, July and August.



Weather stations on the course at Grayhawk (left) relay data to software (right) that Ernie Pock uses to determine how much water is needed.
Courtesy Arizona Alliance for Golf

“We don’t put one drop of water that we don’t need out there on the golf course,” Pock said.

But the superintendents alone had a difficult time getting information across to the public.

“We weren’t doing a good job telling our story,” Pock said.

In 2020, the Arizona Department of Water Resources was in the early stages of creating a water allocation plan for regulated water users. The plan would have forced all golf courses to adjust, but newer golf courses with a smaller turf footprint may have had to decrease their water usage by 25 percent. Prendergast says this could have been an insurmountable regulatory burden.

“If you’re not at the table you’re on the menu,” Prendergast said. “I think golf was very much on that menu.”

Up to the table stepped Gregg Tryhus, owner of Grayhawk Development, a land development company that has developed courses in Scottsdale like Grayhawk and Whisper Rock’s Lower Course. Tryhus founded the Arizona Alliance for Golf and is now its president.

“He was the brainchild behind the alliance,” Prendergast said. “He recognized the need for the industry to be a coalesced, unified voice.”



Part of the mission of the Arizona Alliance for Golf is to highlight golf’s benefits to the state, such as the \$17 million raised for charity at the 2025 WM Phoenix Open.

Christian Petersen, Getty Images

The alliance became an umbrella organization for Arizona golf. It united the golf associations, the superintendents, golf clubs, the tourism industry and more. Pock says he appreciates the organization’s efforts. The alliance makes it easier to tell golf’s story in Arizona,

“AAG is the platform to take our information to the public,” Pock said.

A 2021 economic report produced by Rounds Consulting Group for the alliance found that the golf industry in Arizona accounted for \$6 billion in economic activity that year. It also supported more than 66,000 jobs. Petty says he wouldn’t be surprised if those numbers are underselling

golf's impact.

“I know our economic impact of \$6 billion is supposed to be all-encompassing,” Petty said, “but I can’t imagine that they got every Uber driver or every waiter or waitress at every restaurant because so many tourists come to town to play golf.”

Golf also contributes to charitable organizations. As an example, the WM Phoenix Open raised more than \$17 million for charities in 2025 and more than \$200 million in its history.

When it comes to the environmental impact of golf, the study found golf courses and their vegetation can mitigate extreme heat, crucial during Arizona’s summer months. Furthermore, the study found golf courses account for 2 percent of the daily water use in Arizona.

“People think these golf courses release all this water, you’re standing in a foot of water all the time,” Prendergast said. “I think that’s the perception we have to combat.”

Despite the alliance having some success spreading the message that golf is good for Arizona, the organization isn’t satisfied. Technology can be further improved to help conserve water. People are developing new types of grasses that might not need as much water during those summer months. Prendergast believes improvement is always possible.

“The fact that we only use 2 percent of that state’s total daily water is a great data point,” Prendergast said. “But I think we also need to make sure we say we’re not stopping there.”

Top: Omar Salgado, assistant superintendent of Grayhawk Golf Club’s Raptor Course, checks an app monitoring moisture conditions. Courtesy of Arizona Alliance for Golf.

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