



April 2013

Extreme weather conditions affecting sports fields

The Auckland region was officially declared to be in a state of drought on 6 March 2013. Over summer the extreme weather conditions and severely low soil moisture content are having a significant impact on our region's parks and open spaces and, in particular, our sports fields.

Across the region, sports fields are showing signs of extreme stress and dryness. All natural sports fields are affected: existing sand carpet and soil fields, as well as those under construction. Our main concern is turf cover and the risk that we will not have enough grass, particularly on soil based fields, when the winter rains arrive, typically from May onwards. This may lead to some very muddy conditions and a higher rate of field closures.

It is important to note that some irrigated fields do look relatively green, but due to soil moisture deficit levels the roots are not deep in the soil profile and the turf is not as strong as we would like. This is why we have asked clubs to take it easy on the fields during pre season training.

Transition from summer to winter sport

As we are at the end of the summer season preparations are underway for winter sports. This is a short period when fields are normally renovated with soil de-compaction, levelling, seeding and fertilising. These treatments cannot be undertaken on the soil based fields with the ground so dry, so some of this work may have to be undertaken after the start of the winter season on 6 April. Where this occurs every effort will be made to minimise disruption to weekend competition sport.

Council staff and contractors are constantly monitoring conditions and looking at fields on a case by case basis. We are working under very difficult circumstances but we are focussed on getting as much sport underway in April as we possibly can without destroying the underlying asset.

Field irrigation

Auckland Council looks after around 750 winter sports fields across the region, and approximately one third are sand carpeted. Nearly all of these sand carpeted fields will have in-ground irrigation systems, which we have been using to maintain turf cover over summer. We also have a limited number of travelling irrigator systems that our contractors will manage, using them particularly to maintain premier level fields.

We have been investing in more travelling irrigation systems and planning quick-turnaround sports field renovation, including over-sowing, when fields are moist enough.

Across the region many of the premier level sports fields are sand carpeted, with irrigation systems. Despite this, some of these fields are showing signs of drought stress, as are most of our soil based fields. In the southern part of the region we have a predominance of soil fields with less in-ground irrigation systems.

These fields are extremely dry and turf cover is limited and under severe stress. We have stepped up the irrigation regime, moving travelling irrigators around the area. We are focussing our efforts on a number of premier fields and doing our best to ensure that play at a senior level can get underway at the start of the season. Under these extremely dry conditions, some scheduled renovation work may not be able to be carried out until after the start of the season.

In the northern region, extra water conservation measures are being taken in the Warkworth area to manage irrigation and limit pressure on the town's water supply, which is under extreme stress. We have also had to reduce field irrigation in Riverhead and Huapai due to water supply restrictions.

Sports Field Capacity Development Programme

An important point to remember as we work our way through these extreme weather conditions is the purpose of our Sports Field Capacity Development Programme.

The \$190m allocated to upgrading sports field capacity over the next 10 years has been designed to future proof sports field provision. Building new artificial turfs and sand carpet fields, and upgrading and installing drainage and irrigation systems will all contribute to the way we cope with droughts and extreme winters in the future.

The first projects from Auckland Council's sports field improvement programme are nearing completion. New artificial turfs at Michaels Avenue Reserve in Ellerslie, Starling Park in Ranui, William Green Domain in Highland Park and Seddon Fields in Westmere will soon be ready for play.

For more information about the Sports Field Capacity Development Programme go to www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/projects.