



Above: The bowl-like terrain of Mission Viejo CC's layout is ideal for funneling runoff and groundwater from surrounding neighborhoods to the recycling infrastructure. Photo courtesy of Blankinship & Associates

Left: New drainage lines installed during the restoration of MVCC's course enhanced the concurrent water recycling project. Photo courtesy of MVCC

ELGA winner eyes new challenge

Kevin Hutchins and Mike Blankinship are at it again.

Several years ago their collaboration at the Presidio Golf Course in San Francisco was largely responsible for Hutchins winning the national public GCSAA/*Golf Digest* Environmental Leaders in Golf Award. Today, Hutchins, now superintendent at Mission Viejo Country Club just off the coast south of Los Angeles, and Blankinship, an environmental scientist and owner of a successful consulting and engineering firm out of Davis, Calif., are combining their talents to bring a unique water recycling concept to the forefront of the golf course industry.

Basically, their innovative project captures runoff and groundwater in the bowl-like MVCC layout and conveys it to a local water district that returns it as treated water for area homes and the golf course.

There's much more to it than that, of course, not the least of which was that Hutchins managed to do the recycling project alongside a \$6 million, six-month total restoration of Mission Viejo CC, a 1967 Robert Trent Jones creation. His son, RTJ Jr., directed the restoration. The course reopened in December.

The recycling project was kick-started by concern for Oso Creek, which runs through the golf course and on to the Pacific. It was declared "impaired" by pollutants. The government tested the creek on golf course property, but Hutchins and Blankinship believe the pollution came from surrounding development.

Blankinship, who has a strong turf and water quality background and lists several golf facilities in California as clients, noted that the pollutants were mostly TDS, chlorides and sulfates. "More likely than not, that's coming from the neighbors upstream," he says.

"We have no control over the guy above us washing his car in his driveway," adds Hutchins. "Unfortunately, perception is reality, I guess."

Also, a lined irrigation lake at the south end of the course was in danger of being pushed up by winter runoff, necessitating a groundwater extraction well.

Mike Pock, golf course maintenance director at Whisper Rock Golf Club in Scottsdale and a 28-year member of GCSAA, raised his family's high standing in the industry another notch recently when he was inducted into the Arizona Golf Hall of Fame. Pock, 62, follows his grandfather, Jay Woodward, who entered the Hall in 2000. His cousin is GCSAA CEO Mark Woodward, CGCS. Pock's two sons, Ernie and Jay, are also superintendents in the Scottsdale area.

Thus, utilizing nearly seven miles of new drainage lines installed in the MVCC restoration, plus 8,000 feet of deep drainage lines to protect the creek, and lift stations and pumps to move the captured water through a mile-long pipe to a water district interceptor at the north end of the course, the ambitious effort came to be.

"It was a good-faith effort to try to make things better," says Hutchins, a 14-year GCSAA member. "We think it'll bring in millions of gallons a year that otherwise would have wound up in the ocean and now instead will be coming right back to us. Water is becoming more valuable than gold-out here."

Hutchins and Blankinship are currently negotiating with one and possibly two local water districts that serve the area to reach a fair unit price or water credits.

"We're kind of solving a few problems here," says Blankinship. "We're preventing damage to the irrigation lake, we're using and re-using groundwater while protecting the creek and we're creating a revenue stream for the golf course."

The system as set up now can capture up to 15 percent of the water available.

"There's a heck of a lot more water out there. We're just scratching the surface," says Blankinship, who helped write the Presidio's IPM program when Hutchins won the 2001 ELGA. "The future is to look for ways to capture groundwater drainage and either use it on the course directly or continue to use it like they are now ... sell it to the local water districts and essentially forward the concept of being good environmental stewards by being water recyclers."

Hutchins is looking even further ahead — the rare establishment of a golf course Environmental Management System.

"We have aspirations to be one of the best courses in the country to get on board with that," he says. "This is a good start. It can change your whole mindset on how you manage your property."

Adds Blankinship: "I think Kevin is on to something there (the EMS). From the water resources management side of things, it goes a long way — particularly in California where there is a lot of need for recycled water use."

— Terry Ostmeier, GCM senior staff writer