

Fake turf watered as supplies dry up

Hockey fields need soaking, officials say; Duke coach: We conserve at home

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It's not even real grass.

But in the midst of what may be the worst drought ever in North Carolina, Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are watering the synthetic turfs used by their field hockey teams.

The International Hockey Federation insists.

The universities are not breaking any rules. But like clockwork, as residents in Durham and Chapel Hill see their plants and lawns wither, the sprinklers go on at the UNC-CH Francis E. Henry Stadium and at Duke's Williams Field.

Brad Schnurr, a Chapel Hill contractor who does work in Durham, saw the sprinklers go on one afternoon recently at Duke and drove around the block to make sure he was not seeing things. "Sprinklers aren't even the right term, they're like fire hoses," Schnurr said. "I was like, 'What is that? What is that?' I couldn't believe it."

The International Hockey Federation requires the college teams to saturate the synthetic turfs before each practice and all games. It's not just the way the ball bounces, athletics officials say, although field hockey balls do bounce better on saturated fields. When the turf is wet, coaches add, field hockey players have better grip on the surface and report fewer injuries.

Beth Bozman, Duke's field hockey coach, said she understood why passers-by could get all worked up over sprinklers going full blast amid conservation pleas. "I drive a hybrid, and I recycle," Bozman said. "I'm as green as anybody. I understand."

Durham, which has about 69 days left in its water supply at the current use rate, has banned all outdoor watering. Duke, which could not supply a number for the gallons used on turf watering, gets a business exemption to spray the field and other places on campus as long as overall consumption decreases by 30 percent.

Outdoor watering was permitted in Chapel Hill until Thursday night, when the Orange Water and Sewer Authority adopted more restrictive conservation measures. It was not clear whether UNC-CH would be able to water the field hockey turf for a home game Saturday. OWASA, which reports 180 days left in its supply at current use rates, provides special exemptions for safety reasons.

When Durham started its conservation measures, Bozman cut the turf watering at Duke from 36 minutes per day to 6 minutes on the days the team takes the field. She also asked more of her entire staff. "We made a commitment that we would not water at our homes," she said. "We're very empathetic to the needs of the community." The International Hockey Federation, based in Switzerland, could not be reached for comment. But the requirements certainly raise questions on Triangle turf.

"People want to know why in the world we're watering an AstroTurf field," said Willie Scroggs, UNC-CH assistant athletics director of game operations. "They can understand why we water a natural grass field, but they don't know why we're watering an artificial field."

At the end of this season, Scroggs said UNC-CH will resurface its field and as part of that process, officials plan to see whether there is a way to capture water and reuse it throughout the season.

"We're trying to be very mindful of the situation in our community," Scroggs said. After a home game against Maryland this weekend, the UNC-CH Tar Heels will spend the remainder of the season on the road. Duke, too, will be away more than it's home. Those trips, athletics officials say, will allow the teams to conserve water. "We can then be more in compliance with what the community would like," Scroggs said. anne.blythe@newsobserver.com or (919) 932-8741

