

ABSTRACT: Xeriscape program keeps an Albuquerque golf course in business

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The Paradise Hills Golf Course in Albuquerque, a private course on the city's northwest side, had been served since its construction in 1962 by a private water utility charging subsidized rates to the course. In 2009, the publicly owned Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority acquired the private water system (New Mexico Utilities, Inc.) and implemented ordinance-based rates for all of the utility's former customers. With its water rates no longer subsidized, the golf course operating costs increased significantly. Its business model no longer tenable, the course was in danger of going out of business. In 2011, its owners met with Water Authority officials in hopes of devising a solution that would allow Paradise Hills to remain operational under the new rate structure.

The plan that emerged was to use the Water Authority's existing xeriscape rebate program to help the golf course finance the removal of turf from non-playable irrigated areas. Working with Desert Greens management, the Water Authority outlined a plan to convert out-of-play turf areas into xeric landscapes featuring low-water-use plants, drip irrigation, and mulch. Paradise Hills would receive a \$1 per square foot rebate for all turf removed and a plant coverage allowance variance, one of our xeriscape rebate requirements. Because the course could do the conversion labor with its own grounds' crews, the impact of the \$1 rebate was significantly magnified.

Conversions started in 2011. By 2021, the golf course had transformed nearly 1.4 million square feet of turf into xeric landscapes, conserved more than 350 million gallons of water, and – key to the course's survival – saved over \$2 million dollars in water bills. The end result is an aesthetically pleasing, targeted-play course that patrons love – and which can continue to operate at a profit. Instead of an unsustainable, continuous swath of thirsty turf, the golf course is now a bio-diverse oasis of more than 10,000 plants that thrive under natural conditions and are resistant to climate change and harsh drought conditions. Wildlife and pollinators thrive in this urban oasis, and the golf course is now visited by golfers and bird enthusiast alike.

This presentation will cover the Paradise Hills success story and outline in detail the steps taken by the Water Authority and the golf course to convert non-playable areas into rebate-qualifying xeriscapes. A detailed before-and-after analysis of the resulting monetary and water savings gains will be provided.