Lean times for bluegrass sod growers, survey finds

By Peter Blais

Bluegrass sod growers are generally finding themselves in the same doldrums bedeviling most of the sod industry.

"There's a direct correlation between housing starts and sod sales," said Doug Fender, executive director of the American Sod Producers Association. "Until the housing market turns around, the sod market will be a tough go."

Existing sod farms expanded and new farms cropped up during the economic boom of the early-1980s. As the housing market turned around, many new farms were razed and production costs have remained basically the same because of the 2-to-1 fixed-to-variable cost ratio in the sod business, he added.

Prices in the Chicago area are off 15 to 20 percent, Holmes said. California is down 20 percent and New England and New York 15 to 25 percent, he estimated.

Occasional pockets of prosperity exist where prices have remained the same or even escalated.

Texas, which went into and came out of the recession earlier than most of the country, has seen sod prices triple, Holmes said. Omaha and Lincoln, Neb., along with much of the Pacific Northwest have remained strong, added Fender. And Iowa, where the droughts of 1988 and 1989 ruined much of the local bluegrass crop, is importing bluegrass sod, according to Iowa State University horticulture Professor Nick Christians.

But rising prices are the exception and falling ones the rule in most of the nation. That's good news for U.S. Scotsmen, who can buy a square foot of bluegrass sod from a high of about 24 cents in California to a low of 10 cents in the Midwest, Holmes estimated.

Bluegrass' major assets are its fast-growing rhizomes that allow the turf to repair itself quickly and its dark green color. The large number of bluegrass sod farms also means "no course should be more than 300 to 200 miles from a producer of golf course-quality turf," Fender said. That makes refrigerated trucks to transport turf unnecessary and helps hold prices down.

Its major liabilities are its susceptibility to disease when watered and fertilized heavily under low-cut conditions and thick blades that are more difficult to swing through than many other grasses.

Bluegrass remains popular in the rough areas of many cool-season and transition zone courses. The thick-bladed grass is also common in fairways, but is being pushed by new varieties of bentgrasses, fescues and ryes, especially at high-priced facilities, Christians said.

"Bluegrass is used primarily in the roughs around here," said Dennis Parker, GCSAA President Steve

Survey of major bluegrass sod growers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Address</th>
<th>Mixture</th>
<th>Harvestable acres</th>
<th>At-farm price</th>
<th>Region served</th>
<th>Years in business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bluegrass Lawn Farms</td>
<td>Fescue</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>Sandy, loam, heavy</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.A. Hoer &amp; Sons</td>
<td>Fescue, Rye</td>
<td>17-18</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>Haven sand, loam &amp; riverbed loam</td>
<td>N.Y.C., CT, N.J.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairwood Turf Farm</td>
<td>Fescue</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Valley Turf Farms</td>
<td>Rye</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Loam, clay, sand</td>
<td>D.C., Md.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H &amp; E Sod Nursery</td>
<td>Rye</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Clay loam</td>
<td>Pa., N.J.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulher Ranch Sod Nursery</td>
<td>Rye</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jude Run Sod Farm of Delaware</td>
<td>Fescue</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Sandy loam</td>
<td>Va., Md., Del.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mueller Farms Sod Nursery</td>
<td>Tall fescue</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>Sandy loam</td>
<td>N.Y., N.J., Conn.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Sod</td>
<td>Rye</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Sandy to heavy loam</td>
<td>Calif., Nev.</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cadenelli's assistant at Metedeconk National Golf Club in Jackson, N.J., "Some courses still use a lot of bluegrass. But most of the new ones are going to bentgrass."

"We use it around the fringes of the tee," said Vincent Sasso, manager of Louis DeLea & Sons, Inc., an East Northport, N.Y., sod farm, and owner of a nearby golf course. "It's too thick to use elsewhere. You can't mow it down low enough."

While new proprietary varieties that are more disease-resistant and shade-tolerant are constantly being developed, some of the common varieties are making a comeback, Christians said. Among them are South Dakota Common, Ken Blue and Argyle.

"They grow into dormancy quicker, but they also come out quicker," the Iowa State researcher said. "And they often require less maintenance."

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