Bent on improvement

By MARK LESLIE

Glamour. That's what bentgrasses spell in the world of golf.

The market size is minuscule compared to other species of turfgrass. Yet, more and more companies are vying for that tiny piece. Why?

• "I don't know. I think they have to learn their lesson," said Bill L. Rose, president of Tee-2-Green Corp., who has had nearly a corner on the market for 30 years with Penncrest and its sister cultivars. "Two hundred pounds of seed can supply a whole golf course. The new construction isn't a big market. But everybody can't wait to get in it."

• "It doesn't make sense," said Dr. Milt Engelke of Texas AM. "I wouldn't put bentgrass high on my list if I were starting a business, because of the cost of creating such a variety and the limited market. I'd spend my time on something you can get volume out of."

• "Glamour, absolutely," said Steve Tubbs, vice president of Turf Merchants. "All of a sudden, it's a churning pot, and everybody wants to get into the act. It's the smallest, most elite market of cool-season turfgrasses. There is a little tiny piece of the pie and everybody's going after it, with probably more products than have existed until now."

There appears to be an industry feeling that producing a bentgrass legitimates a seed company. But it is a dangerous market to enter.

Superintendents' jobs are on the line with bentgrasses more than any other turf, said Kevin Morris, director of the National Turfgrass Federation and its National Superintendents' jobs are on the line with bentgrasses more than any other turf, said Kevin Morris, director of the National Turfgrass Federation and its National Turfgrass Evaluation Program, run under the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Beltsville, Md.

Therefore, "they have been reluctant to try something new on a large scale. It's been difficult for seed companies to break into that market because Penncrest is so established."

"If a superintendant has good greens, he keeps his job. If he doesn't, he loses it," said Tubbs. "These grasses have to be tested and tried for years before some golfer guy puts his whole course at risk."

But Tubbs warned that this striving for glamour may lead to disaster.

"Seed Research of Oregon, Lofts, Pickseed West, International Seeds, Jacklin, TML...they're all coming out with their own bentgrasses," he said. "Suddenly it's pandemonium. It will be just like we've done to the tall fescue or perennial rye market. There will be too many players, selling underprice. So it will remove the last remaining, profitable market in the cool-season turf business."

"Will anyone win? It depends on the person who can make their product the most profitable for a distributor to sell," he said.

Researchers reap seed harvest in China

By PETER BLAIS

PEOPLES REPUBLIC OF CHINA — The roads may be a mess and agricultural technology behind the times. But the PRC has one of the best phone systems in the world.

Why? "China didn't have to go through the learning curve we did in the United States," said Dr. Milton Engelke, one of four U.S. researchers who spent three weeks last summer collecting various turfgrasses in south and central China. "There are no telephone poles or underground cable lines. The phone system is relatively new and calls are made via microwave."

Likewise, the Chinese golf industry will benefit from its late entry into the game and the efforts of researchers like Engelke. The Texas A&M University professor expects last summer's turf search to result in new strains of grass that will show up in China within the next five to seven years.

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