An ear to the floor...

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100. Competition breeds this type of one-upmanship, but it also breeds studied innovation; and no segment of the golf industry has benefited more from a spirited technological free-for-all than irrigation. Case in point: While celebrating the 20th anniversary of its computerized Maxi system this year, Rain Bird trotted out its Maxi for Windows Stratus, the company’s second generation of Windows-based software designed for superintendents with little or no computer experience. Toro countered with TouchNet, an irrigation control system operated via fingers on a computer screen, as opposed to key strokes. Obviously, this innovation is also aimed at the technologically challenged superintendent.

In November, on the heels of Pursell Industries’ alliance with J.R. Simplot and Vigor Corp. its commitment to golf, I opined on the increasingly crowded, competitive fertilizer industry. This dog-eat-dog situation was highlighted in Orlando, where all players fought for the attention of superintendents while trotting out the market’s new product line fast: slow-release technology. Vigoro jumped into the game with V-Cote, which joins The Scotts Company’s Poly-S, Pursell’s Polyon, and ESN from United Horticultural Supply. However, the prime-time players — which also include Milorganite, Lebanon Seaboard, Vicksburg Chemical and The Andersons — would be well advised to peer over their collective shoulder at Terra, golf’s sleeping giant. Once an ag-only firm with $3 billion in sales, Terra has set its considerable sights on golf by aggressively gobbling up distributorships in the Midwest and Southeast. While most of Terra’s 400-plus distributors are primarily agricultural, the firm plans to convert them all into golf/ag dual outlets. Further, by its own admission, Terra has there’s the wheat issue: “Wheat prices are high, and wheat can be grown on ryegrass fields,” he explained. “If it’s $5 per bushel, the growers might plant wheat instead. With wheat, costs are lower, you don’t have to spot spray and you can sell it on the futures market.”

It appears the Golf Car Manufacturers Association, a trade group representing the interests of the industry’s major players, that leaves only Yamaha and E-Z-Go to compare figures. “And there isn’t much point in that,” said one industry source. Liability and emission issues will more than likely bind the three major manufacturers together in some form, but the association has lost a major raison d’etre.

Rohm & Haas, makers of Dimension pre-emergent herbicide, have taken a gamble by cutting recommended application rates when the product is applied to fertilizer. If the weather is good this year, they’ll likely come out smelling like a rose as performance will probably not dip commensurate with the application rate. This will also place pressure on competitors to follow suit by similarly cutting application rates, and profits. However, if the weather is less predictable, conditions more favorable to disease — the lower rate could backfire on Rohm & Haas. Key to applying products is knowing how to apply to fertilizer is pellet size: The smaller the pellet, the more evenly the chemical is spread. With a lower application rate, it’s even more vital that superintendents see out the smaller pellet.

Stay tuned.