Empowerment proves effective on grounds crews

By MARK LESLIE

INCOLNSHIRE, Ill. — Autonomy and empowerment are the operative words in assembling the most effective employees, according to Terry Riordan of the University of Nebraska and a leading expert on buffalo grass, a native turf that has received considerable attention because of its drought resistance and slow-growing nature. Beginning with a $4,000 grant back in 1984, the University of Nebraska's turfgrass science team has received approximately $500,000 in United States Golf Association Green Section research funding for buffalo grass. Riordan received his doctorate in turfgrass plant breeding from Purdue University, worked eight years as an O.M. Scott researcher, and has taught at the University of Nebraska for the past 15 years.

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the water utility if they transplant with buffalograss or a water-savin Bermudagrass. San Antonio is considering a law that would allow homeowners to only plant buffalograss or Bermudagrass and would forbid St. Augustinegrass. That sort of thing will begin to happen elsewhere. We're not looking to get buffalograss spread everywhere. But changing even 10 percent of the turf areas to buffalograss would result in a major water savings.

GCN: Where have golf courses been using buffalograss? TR: I just got back from Phoenix and there were three or four courses there that had used it in the rough around landing areas, in the secondary rough, and bordering tees and bunkers. The Raven Golf Club and DC Ranch were two courses using it. It works well in out-of-play areas where you'd normally use Bermudagrass.

There's a course I visited recently in southern Illinois that used it in most of the rough area and surrounding the bunkers. GCN: Do you expect to see it used more often in the future? TR: There have been many improvements in the last five years and we're working on a buffalograss that could eventually be used in the fairway. But the demand isn't there, yet. In 25 years, especially if the water shortage worsens, it will be much different. We're looking at this as developing a grass for the next century.

We've started the patent process on three new varieties. One is very similar to 609, but is more cold-hardy and could be used as far north as Nebraska. We've also developed two Northern types that have looked good as far north as Minnesota. They have good cold hardiness, good density, dark-green color and can tolerate cutting heights of 6/8 inch, which is a normal fairly height. Sod farms are increasing their vegetative supply. They should be available on a limited basis this year and on a full-scale basis by 1998.

There is still a tremendous potential for buffalograss and other new grasses, like the sea-shore paspalums being developed at the University of Georgia. They will pay dividends in the future. GCN: Are some architects more likely than others to use buffalograss?

TR: Scott Miller has used it on four courses he's done recently. Ken Dye said he's tried it and liked it very much. But I haven't been contacted by many architects. If they did, I'd be glad to give them my support and visit their sites if need be.

GCN: Do golfers have any aversions to buffalograss?

TR: Most golfers wouldn't notice the difference between buffalograss and Bermudagrass in the golf course rough. Superintendents have some reluctance to convert to it because they aren't sure how to maintain it. It's easy to maintain. But it's hard to convince a superintendent whose job depends on the grass being green all the time. The golf course superintendent has enough challenges without having to switch to a new turfgrass species.

GCN: Is there a way superintendents could experiment with buffalograss without endangering their jobs if it didn't grow as expected?

TR: I'd try planting some on 2 or 3 acres in an out-of-play area, or maybe on a severe slope that rarely comes into play. Some of the new seeded varieties could make it easier.

GCN: Does the university and USGA receive anything from the buffalograss sales?

TR: Yes. We split our royalties 50-50 and we manage, check and monitor every year, too. If you're not doing a good job, they let you know and help get you pointed back in the right direction.

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