Arizona-based ryegrass issue up in the air

By MICHAEL LEVANS

PHOENIX — A controversy that Oregon seed companies thought was put to bed has been stirred yet again.

In mid-August, a group representing Arizona wheat farmers asked the Arizona Agriculture Department to reconsider its decision to allow ryegrass planting on golf courses this winter.

In July, the Arizona Farm Bureau Federation asked Agriculture Director Sheldon Jones to ban ryegrass seed from Oregon, the nation’s largest supplier, unless it is certified to be free of the fungus believed to cause Karnal bunt.

The request was the latest attempt by Arizona farmers at lifting restrictions imposed by the federal government. According to recent reports, last year’s federal quarantine on Arizona wheat cost the industry $100 million, while Karnal bunt was found in less than 4 percent of the state’s fields.

Oregon’s Department of Agriculture recently met with Arizona. The consensus was to wait until findings were gathered from a bunt and smut disease symposium that took place on August 18-20 in Washington D.C.

“The Arizona wheat growers want help in getting this zero tolerance of Karnal bunt removed for exporting,” said Michael Robinson, president of Corvalis, Ore.-based Seed Research of Oregon Inc.

“They have a lot of wheat in storage that they can’t ship.”

William Walsh, president of the Rio Verde Country Club in northwest Phoenix, said Arizona’s economy would have been hard hit by a ryegrass ban.

“The financial impact to the state would be devastating,” Walsh said. “We don’t want to wait until the evidence is in.”

Now, instead of each Kerley representative maintaining a region, reps will be assigned by company. “It’s a more centralized approach,” said Brian Lawrence, Kerley’s director of communications.

According to Gerald Kolb, group vice president, the former bottom-up geographic sales structure of the company no longer fully addressed the needs of the company’s distributors and dealers.

“There has been a tremendous amount of consolidation within the distribution channels of our industry in recent years,” said Kolb. “We are keenly aware that to grow our position effectively in the future, we need to better meet the needs of our customers in the United States and abroad with a customer-centered sales and distribution network.”

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Under the reorganization, Kolb will lead the management which includes five teams responsible for different market segments. Mike Buffington has been named vice president of domestic sales. Reporting to Buffington are three geographically-centered national account managers: Ron Johnson, west; Bill Morris, central; and Garon Steward, east.

Domestic sales will be supported by five account managers in the field who work directly with dealers and retailers. These account managers include Chuck Albrecht, western states and Canada; Val Mitchell, north central states and Canada; Kelly Sears, southern states; Jan McNinch, southeastern states; and Jan...