Eco-terrorists strike Pure Seed test farm

By JAY FINEGAN

HUBBARD, Ore. - An underground eco-terrorist group styling itself the Anarchist Golfing Association attacked Pure Seed Testing Inc. here last month, smashing into greenhouses, overturning and stomping on experimental grass plots, scattering identification labels, and spray painting such slogans as "Nature Bites Back."

Crystal Fricker, director of research and new president, estimated damage at about $500,000, but said the value of projects destroyed in the raid could easily have run over $1 million. "It's hard to put a value on it," she said. "We've lost years of research."

The Federal Bureau of Investigation swung into action quickly, assigning 10 agents to the case. At press time, no arrests had been made.

The vandals stole onto the 110-acre research farm during the night. "They hit two different greenhouses and went across 70 acres of the farm, hitting different nurseries, pulling up plants, cutting the heads off plants, and dumping 200 pots of ornamental grasses collected from around the world," Fricker said. "They left little clues that they had been everywhere - golf balls embossed with their insignia: a circle-A anarchist symbol."

Destructive beetle spreading fast through Northeast

By JAY FINEGAN

BRENTWOOD, N.H. - An unusually pernicious turf-destroying beetle, the European chafer, is marching briskly through Northeastern states and appears poised to extend its range. Speaking to superintendents from Maine and New Hampshire at the Mount Washington Hotel here, entomologist Stanley R. Swier said the chafer can do "a phenomenal amount of damage."

Swier also expressed concern that the insect may be on the verge of a breakout phase. "The chafer will lay its eggs in potted nursery plants, and these plants will be shipped around the country," he said. "They can also be carried by cars and trains. They emerge by the millions in late June, and they'll fly right into vehicles. When you look at

Course owners, IRS negotiate

By A. WASHBURN

CHARLESTON, S.C. - The National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA), working with the national accounting firm KPMG, met here recently with officials of the Internal Revenue Service to seek more favorable tax treatment for golf courses. At issue was a 45-year-old tax regulation dealing with the construction and maintenance costs of modern layouts.

Continued on page 5
Beetle
Continued from page 1

and has been seen as far west as Rochester, N.Y. The chafer has also struck in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts and elsewhere in the region.

"Most of the entomologists in the Northeast are looking at the chafer now," said Swier, a Ph.D. entomologist with the University of New Hampshire's extension service. "We don't know of anything effective enough to totally wipe them out. They will keep on moving as long as there are areas that have good, fibrous roots."

Many golf course superintendents are unaware of the threat, Swier said, because the invasion has been spotty. "It's not in every course," he noted. Also, because the insect prefers to fly at night, it's not often seen. Consequently, the beetle can inflict its damage long before it comes to a superintendent's attention.

Superintendent Tom Rowell, at Cochecho Country Club, in coastal Dover, N.H., is a case in point. He had no idea what was killing his rough two years ago. "At first, the bad spots were few and minor, and I didn't think too much of it," he said. "But then the damage got worse."

A few days later, Rowell began noticing large, unfamiliar beetles on his greens early in the morning. He sent a few specimens to Swier, who identified them as European chafers.

CHAFER'S LIFE CYCLE

Swier has been conducting field trials on the insect for the New England Regional Turf Foundation (NERTF). "We're looking at the correlation of life cycle with degree days, so we can predict the stages of the chafer in the ground for better timing of insecticides," he said.

The adult chafer emerges from the ground in June and flies up to the trees to mate. The female then drops to the ground searching for suitable soil to lay the eggs. "They tend to prefer soil slightly on the dry side," Swier said. "That's why, on golf courses, you will more likely see them in your drier areas, where there might be some, or perhaps in unirrigated roughs. But that doesn't mean you won't also see them on irrigated fairways."

As the eggs transform into grubs, the larval chafer burrows into root zones and goes to work. "They are larger than Japanese beetle grubs, so they eat more," Swier said. "Also, they are more cold-tolerant. The Japanese beetle grub might stop feeding by late September and start burrowing down to spend the winter, but the chafer grub will feed into early November.

"Also, in the spring," he said, "they are the first ones to come back up from the depths of the soil and start feeding on grass roots. They'll come up as early as February or March in the Northeast. The roots haven't even had a chance to start growing, and the chafer are already at work. They will feed right through May, and then start turning into the pupal stage. But when they emerge as adults, in mid to late June, they feed little if at all.

"After they mate and lay their eggs, they die," Swier added. "Superintendents will tend to see the dead bodies on low-cut, maintained grasses."

NOTHING BUT DIRT

The beetle can cause extensive turf damage. Last year, for example, a major infestation plagued Dover, N.H. The chafers hit early and they hit hard. By the time the snow cleared that spring, many lawns were completely devastated.

"It was the talk of the town," said Rowell, the Cochecho superintendent, who was inundated with questions from club members. "We had entire lawns without a single blade of grass. They were nothing but dirt. You could turn down any street in Dover, and lawn after lawn was totally destroyed. They also wiped out entire cemeteries."

At Cochecho, Rowell had treated isolated areas of the rough in 1998, but the chafer made another run at the course last year. Bird activity alerted him to the threat. "Once the snow was gone, the..."

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crows started really tearing up the roughs trying to get at these huge grubs," he said. "They are big and hard to control if you don't get to them when they're young. The thing is, you're not looking for any damage that early in the season, but there it was. We'd never had grub problems before..."

The thing is, you're not looking for any damage that early in the season, but there it was. We'd never had grub problems before. The grubs are first hatching. That way, you have ground that is not recommended for unirrigated areas. He calculates the cost of defending against the European chafer at about $100 per acre. "The cost of golf just went up," he said.

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The combination was effective last summer. Cochecho, right in the midst of Dover's severe chafer outbreak, lost only 4,000 square feet of turf to the beetle, mostly on mounds that tended to be drier than the rest of the fairway. "Other than that," Rowell said, "we kept it at bay."

On his rough, Rowell is staying with Merit, because Mach 2 is not recommended for unirrigated areas. He calculates the cost of defending against the European chafer at about $100 per acre. "The cost of golf just went up," he said. "We've got the design and the landscape work before bringing this course to the top. We're going to do everything we can to make it perfect and..."

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Snyder and his staff are now finishing the putting green and doing landscape work before getting to the final task—building a maintenance facility."

The course held its grand opening at the end of May and has received rave reviews and high levels of play. "The grass still has to fill in a bit, but we should be in good shape," said Snyder. "Now I can finally put the construction equipment away and concentrate on doing some of the agronomic work that is necessary. Rees Jones is coming up soon and he wants to make it perfect and bring this course to the top. We've got the design and the resources now to do that."

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