Off The Fringe

At Any Cost

PERENNIAL RYEGRASS, DESPITE A POSSIBLE PRICE INCREASE, IS STILL WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD

Editor's note: Golfdom asked Turf Merchants Owner and President Steve Tubbs to provide his take on the status of turf-type perennial ryegrass in the industry. In the future, we'll provide other supplier-written articles on various topics.

By Steve Tubbs

With the passage of the Plant Variety Protection Act (PVP) in 1970, private breeders began to improve turfgrasses in earnest. One of the easiest species to improve was turf-type perennial ryegrass because advances could be made each year through open pollination.

Turf characteristics, such as color and texture, were improved with each generation. The first major turf types to be improved were Manhattan (which evolved from a native clone discovered in New York's Central Park by Rutgers turf professor Reed Funk) and Pennfine ryegrass.

The increase of these finer, darker varieties literally gave birth to the overseeding market. Since most of the resort golf meccas were in warm-season areas, fine-leaf perennial became the winter cover of choice on top of the dormant bermuda. Closeness of cut, ball roll and ease of transition led to the growth of the fine leaves — from several million pounds in the early 1970s to several hundred million pounds in the 1990s.

Breeders not only improved color and texture. They also improved yields by selecting clones that developed the most seed florets. For instance, the Manhattan 4 perennial ryegrass that's marketed today yields twice as much as the original Manhattan did in 1970.

So even though a farmer is being paid the same price per pound for perennial ryegrass that he was paid in 1970, the only thing that's saving him... Continued on page 19

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now is this doubling in yield. Like-
wise, superintendents and other turf
users are buying fine-leaf perennial at
prices lower than what they paid in
1970. Could any superintendent
name a single item that he or she buys
for the course that was the same price
30 years ago?

Sadly, the advent of the new mil-
leum brought overproduction of
turf-type perennials and the supply
was exaggerated by the AgriBioTech
bankruptcy. Even though the com-
pany is gone, the acreage of grass pro-
duction it planted was still in the
ground and mostly without a home.

Now it appears that turf-type peren-
nial ryegrass production has turned a
corner. The 2001 crop, with 162,000
acres harvested, was the lowest the in-
dustry had seen since 1994. Projections
for this year are smaller yet, with about
130,000 acres of production. This will
bring us the smallest total crop in a
decade and could lead to higher prices
by as early as spring 2003.

With reduced carryover and average
yields, supply could equal demand for
the first time in many years. Should
anything happen to the crop before
harvest, we could even see a shortage of
perennial since total supply would be
less than normal demand. Last year's
harvest produced a crop that was well
below average and shortened the crop
by at least 30 million pounds.

Additionally, many of the peripheral
acres of production in southern Wash-
ington, eastern Oregon and off-shore
(New Zealand, Australia) have been se-
verely reduced or disappeared entirely.
Europe is importing large quantities of
Oregon-grown perennial ryegrass for
the first time in many years. At current
levels, perennial ryegrass prices are well
below a grower's cost of production,
and tens of thousands of acres

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have been plowed since 1999.

Yes, fine-leaf perennial ryegrass has
been a tremendous boon for the golf
industry over the years. Could you
imagine what the Masters would be like
every year if not for Oregon ryegrass?

At any price, turf-type perennial
ryegrass beautifies any course that it
graces. More importantly, it brings in
the golfers who otherwise would be
playing on brown,
dormant bermuda.

Turf Merchants' Tubbs
is based in Tangent,
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