No News Is Good News

Word on the street is that there aren't new chemistries poised to join the pre-emergent herbicide market - but that may just mean what's out there is doing the job

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR

The sounds of silence are pervading the halls of basic chemical manufacturers — at least when it comes to bringing a new pre-emergent herbicide chemistry to market.

There is no single explanation for the lack of new formulations. Some attribute it to changing maintenance practices. Others say there's little impetus to create new chemistries because superintendents seem satisfied with the products currently available. Still others insist that the costs of bringing new chemistries to such a small market are prohibitive. But that doesn't mean there aren't niche markets and small improvements that can be made to current pre-emergent herbicides during the next few years, experts say.

"I'd be hard-pressed to say there's anything new on the horizon on the pre-emergent herbicide front," says Joe Di-Paola, golf market manager for Syngenta Professional Products.

Changing practices
Dave Fearis, turf and ornamental products specialist for PBI Gordon, says smaller maintenance budgets are forcing more superintendents to move from pre-emergent broadcast herbicide applications to postemergent spot treatments instead. He's not sure the practice is widespread yet, but believes it's more prevalent than some may think.

"When you go with a pre-emergent application, it tends to be over a large area," Fearis says. "That costs more money than going out after the weeds emerge and spot treating those areas. There's a cost factor involved that influences some decisions superintendents have to make."

In fact, George Raymond, business manager for herbicides and plant growth regulators for Bayer Environmental Sciences, believes superintendents are making a slow, willful decision to reduce the number of pre-emergent herbicides they use. After all, that's what happened in the agricultural market. Farmers discovered that they could get by with putting down less material if they used postemergent products, he says.

"You're seeing a slow, steady movement in that direction in turf as well," Raymond

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says. "Superintendents are working to get
their dependence on pre-emergent prod-
ucts down. It will become a permanent
change in their habits over time."

But Kyle Miller, senior technical
specialist for the turf and ornamental
market at BASF, says he doesn't believe
superintendents will ever get to the
point where they sacrifice the overall
look of their golf course to save a few
bucks.

"The bottom line is that they still
have to have the golf course looking good
to their members, or they will be out
of jobs," Miller says. "I don't ever see a
time when superintendents will go
strictly to postemergent herbicides."

Raymond agrees. "Pre-emergent prod-
ucts will always be there, particularly be-
cause superintendents don't like to change
their programs if they're working."

Stable market

The pre-emergent herbicide market is
fairly stable and has been for the past sev-
eral years, according to the experts.
Superintendents seem largely satisfied
with the range of products on the mar-
ket and aren't clamoring for new ones,

Although there's some anecdotal evidence
of mild weed resistance, experts say it's
unlikely to be a widespread problem.

So what's next?

BASF's Miller says companies will tweak
their chemistries to extend their use-
fulness for superintendents. He points
to BASF's encapsulation of one of its
products to improve the ease of handling
of the product and its crabgrass control.

Bayer's Raymond says superinten-
dents will see more companies moving
toward combination products to save su-
perintendents time and money by al-
lowing them to do two applications (say,
fertilizer and herbicide) for the price of
one. He also says companies will focus
on trying to lower application rates.

"Superintendents are always looking
for materials that will have a lower
impact on the environment," Raymond
says. "The residuals may not be as long
as they were in the past, but the overall
environmental impact will be lower.
Companies are going to work on meet-
ing that need."

Syngenta's DiPaola says the company
will tweak some of its chemistries to meet
specific needs in different regions of the
country. It will also work to meet emerg-
ing uses, such as fall applications to pre-
pare the course for the spring, Poa annua
management in the mid-Atlantic region
and overseeding in the South and West,
he adds. "There are some clear regional
applications that we intend to explore,"
DiPaola says.

PBI Gordon's Fearis says that one
other factor has influenced the lack of
development of new pre-emergent her-
bicide chemistries over the past few years:
the incredible number of chemical com-
pany mergers. He says such mergers can
often disrupt the research and develop-
ment flows that existed over the pre-
merger companies.

"Maybe after all the companies are
integrated from these mergers, there will
be a strong movement to create new
technologies," Fearis says. "I'm always
amazed at what people can do when they
set their minds to it.

Whatever happens, companies will
continue to improve their product lines,
and that's a good thing for the end-user," he says.