



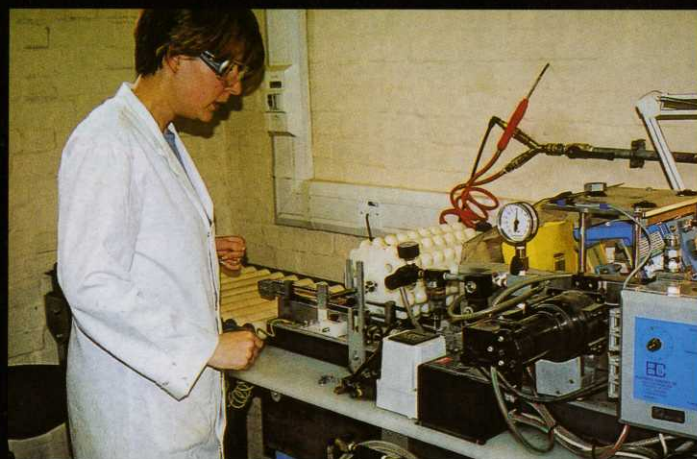
Aventis, formerly Rhône Poulenc, is the only amenity company in the UK involved in research and development of new compounds to protect the nation's sports turf. Scott MacCallum investigated...

Dream team

It's a fact of life that many people suffer from nightmares. For me it's on the recurring theme of being chased for miles and miles by an unknown assailant who I can't quite shake but never actually get to see. For others it can be stuck in a confined space with walls that slowly close in on them... or being stuck in a pit of snakes, spiders or rats depending upon which dishes up the greatest blood pressure boost.

I would imagine for those in the greenkeeping profession the thought of an overnight outbreak of a rare grass eating fungus or plague of casting worms would be enough to cause otherwise sane men to wake up covered in freezing perspiration and ready to rush into work before day break to make sure what appeared a nightmare was not in fact a premonition of gruesome reality.

But thankfully there is a company which is doing its best to ensure that the country's greenkeepers are able to sleep soundly safe in the knowledge that even if some horrible disease or pest is attacking his beloved turf there is something available with which to fight back.



Far right: Extensive glasshouse trials at Ongar

Above right: Caroline Rutherford carries out final checks on a seeding machine

Below: John Hall and Jenny Murphy examine turf plots



Aventis, formerly Rhône Poulenc, is the only amenity company in the UK involved in research and development of new compounds to protect the nation's sports turf, and at the company's Ongar site in Essex - recently designated the European headquarters of a truly worldwide operation - a staff of 500 work towards producing antidotes to some of the problems which give fine turf managers the greatest nightmares.

"We are developing new fungicides to attack the diseases which are now hitting this country, things like Take-All Patch," revealed John Hall, Market Development Manager for Northern Europe.

"Ants have become a major problem while this year we've also got a big problem with chafer grubs and we're developing chemicals to try to control these at the moment. In fact we're constantly looking at different chemicals to control different diseases, pests, weeds etc. It's a long process but the work should ultimately benefit the customer," he added.

One issue which is currently exercising the fine minds at Aventis is worm control bearing in mind some of the extremely effective methods of old have been banned.

"There are environmental issues which have been brought in and the industry may have only a couple of years left with Carbenidzim. We are looking at different methods of control at the moment, although we prefer to use the term suppression to control," said John.

"What the chemicals do is suppress the casting worms - which amount to only three of the 25 species which commonly operate in the UK - and leave the others alone. The older compounds used to be extremely effective but killed rather than suppressed a wide range of worm species."

It would be fair to say that greenkeepers form one of Aventis' more demanding customer sectors.

"They do have specific problems because of the high aesthetic value placed on a course and the need to maintain high presentation standards. He is very concerned about any disease he gets on fairways and greens whereas local authorities perhaps wouldn't be quite so worried if they had a bit of fusarium or worm casts. The demands of greenkeepers ensure that we work hard to meet their specifications," said John.

The origins of the company go back to the early days of May and Baker who



worked out of a factory in Wandsworth, London, producing products like Bismuth Salts, ethers and collidions.

French company, Rhône Poulenc, became involved in 1927 when the companies began working jointly, however, they continued to trade as May and Baker for many years. A move to Dagenham preceded the move to Ongar which was made in 1953. In 1989 the May and Baker name was replaced by that of Rhône Poulenc due to the recent change to Aventis which came about by the "marriage" of the French, Rhône Poulenc, to Hoechst Schering, of Germany, (and in the UK Rhône Poulenc merged with Agrevo) which produced a global total of \$20 billion company boasting a total of 95,000 staff, from which the European arm of the Environmental Science Sector is now run from Ongar.

Aventis Environmental Science is a sector within the main Aventis group and consists of Turf and Amenity, Household Insecticides, Public Hygiene and Vermin Control. The Turf and Amenity business for Europe is run from the offices at Ongar.

"On the whole we are still associated with the name Rhône Poulenc but some people still remember us as May and Baker but we are working towards

making the Aventis name familiar. That process started at Harrogate this year.

"It is making people realise that all the same products, like Rovral Green, are there but under the Aventis name. The labelling is different but the products the same," explained John.

Ongar was actually a farm in a previous life. On site, as well as a 150 strong commercial team, is the research and development teams who carry through the painstaking process of bring a new product to market.

Much of the process is now done by robots - such as producing the rows and rows of mini test plots and the spraying of these with chemicals and potential new products.

"We spray up to 30,000 plots a week and of these 0.1% are considered worthy of moving forward to the next stage in the process to see if they are effective against specific species," explained Caroline Rutherford, Research Biologist, adding that this process alone, as well as glass house trials, can take three years.

The next stage involves field trials on a well appointed site to the rear of the office buildings.

This allows the researchers to assess potential new products under more realistic conditions.

It all adds up to a costly process with the expense involved in developing a new active ingredient come in at a cool £60 million.

"Even then we have to make our return over a remarkably short space of time," explained John.

After the initial three years of screening the patent is registered and three years after that the first registration is sought from the relevant bodies; in years four to six factory construction takes place with the first sales taking place in the fifth year. Break even from a financial standpoint is not reached until year 13 is reached and the final chance to reap any rewards from a successful product disappears when the patent expires in year 20.

"We continue to work with the Regulatory Bodies in a long term investment programme, in order that we can gain approvals for new compounds and adhere to environmental regulations

However, strange as it may seem Aventis is right behind the tighter legislation.

"At the end of the day it makes the products we produce much safer so it is of benefit to the customer. We are certainly pro it because we are keen to protect our end user as well as the environment."

Another part of this safety conscious

approach is the BACCS scheme which Aventis has introduced in conjunction with the BASIS and the Crop Protection Association, formerly the BAA.

"This is an advanced contractor certification scheme which encourages contractors to meet certain criteria before becoming accredited. Hopefully it may mean that when jobs are put out to tender it is not the cheapest option which is chosen but a person who has been adjudged capable and qualified to do the task," explained John.

Further details can be obtained from Alan Horgan, Contractor and Utilities Customer Manager.

It's all part of Aventis' on-going policy of development both in providing new and exciting products with safety and conscientious environmental stewardship at the hub.

This all helps a greenkeeper's ability to sleep soundly at night... but doesn't exactly help me with my recurring nightmare!

