

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. BRUCE BRANHAM, THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS' NEWEST FACULTY MEMBER

*Paul Vermeulen, Director
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Since my arrival to the Mid-Continent Region, I have spent many hours visiting with the faculty at the University of Illinois (Drs. Branham, Fermanian, Kane, Voigt and Wilkinson). From these visits, I have gained a deep appreciation for their expertise on topics ranging from computer science to environmentally responsible pest control. In a nutshell, this group of individuals has the experience and know-how to provide technical leadership and student training well into the next century.

This interview with Dr. Branham, who is a weed control and pesticide fate specialist, sheds light on the University of Illinois' future goals and some of the challenges they face in trying to achieve these goals.

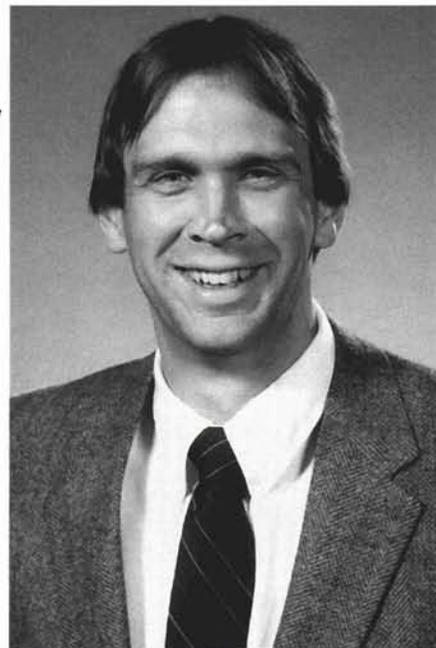
In what area(s) is research required to support the technological advancement of the turfgrass industry?

To support the continued growth of the turfgrass industry, both applied research and basic research need to be conducted. Applied research is work that needs to be done to support the day-to-day activities of turfgrass practitioners. For example, before a new product can be released onto the market, research is needed to determine its mode of action, movement in the environment, use rates, etc. Without applied research, end users would not have the necessary information to make sound management decisions. Basic research is a dis-

covery process, such as gene mapping, that scientists use to improve their understanding of turfgrass plant development. This form of research is needed to support advancements in the rapidly developing area of biotechnology.

Does the University of Illinois have any plans to expand the turfgrass research program?

Yes, our plan is to take advantage of new opportunities that will arise by increasing our exposure in the large metropolitan areas throughout the state. With more exposure, we hope that the golfing community will feel more confident giving their



support to the research program. At present, our program's biggest limitation is a lack of graduate students and technicians who help complete routine activities.

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Have recent cuts in the federal and state budgets had an impact on turfgrass research at the University of Illinois?

The budget cuts have had a greater impact on research conducted on major commodities, such as corn and soybeans, because they have historically received the lion's share of public support. Since turfgrass research has received relatively little financial support in the past, the cuts have, in comparison, been minor. The most significant cut in the past year was the loss of funding for a technician's position. So yes, while some might say that the cuts have been minor, relatively speaking, they have had a significant impact.

Is funding from the private sector replacing lost federal and state funding?

It is hard to state whether or

not private support is making up the difference because it varies so much from year to year.

Is limited funding an issue for the University of Illinois?

Yes. Right now it is very difficult to expand research activities because we don't have consistent funding for technical support. Without consistent funding, it is very difficult to hire trained individuals who can work on projects from beginning to end.

If funding is a limiting resource, how might interested parties offer their support?

Historically, small grants have been the most popular form of support; and they are, of course, crucial to ongoing activities at the University of Illinois. It is important to realize, however, that grants have a few limitations. First, they are usually earmarked for specific applied research pro-

jects and, therefore, offer little assistance to basic research projects that are equally important. Second, they are an inconsistent funding source from year to year and cannot be used to hire needed technicians. Third, preparing grant proposals can be very time consuming, which takes away productive time from the faculty.

To truly support the technological advancement of the turfgrass industry, a unified fundraising effort is needed from the entire golfing community. Such an effort would develop a reliable funding source that would support the infrastructure of the research program, i.e., technicians, graduate students, field and laboratory equipment purchases, etc. It would also be appropriate for such a funding source to have some kind of board or committee to which the university is accountable. This approach would ensure that funds

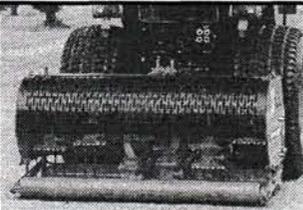
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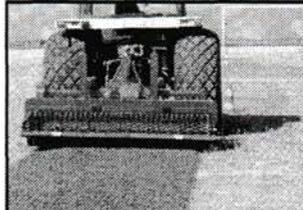
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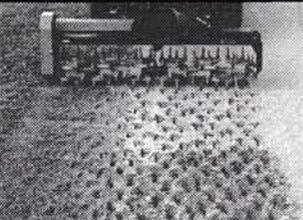
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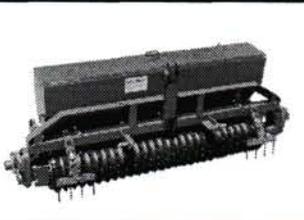
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are used responsibly and that large individual contributions could not steer the research program away from work that is in the best interests of the entire state.

What are the major sources of funding for the research program?

Funding for present research activities comes primarily from the GCSAA, USGA, Illinois Turfgrass Foundation and small grants. I might add that having the support of these groups is very valuable as it demonstrates to the university that turfgrass research is important and draws financial support from prestigious organizations in the industry. Here again, the creation of a significant, unified funding body would help the turfgrass program compete with major commodities for federal and state funds.

Is the University of Illinois considering any new continuing education opportunities for turfgrass professionals in Illinois?

It is important to pick and choose new opportunities very carefully so as not to duplicate the efforts of the GCSAA or other existing programs. Presently, the university hosts an annual Field Day (scheduled for August 20, 1997), offers an introductory short course in turfgrass management, and is a major participant in the ITF winter conference. Looking ahead, working with the Internet is probably the most promising new opportunity.

Is attending the University of Illinois a good choice for students interested in a turfgrass career?

Yes, absolutely. Students at the University of Illinois can choose from a wide variety of courses to hone their skills in agronomy, plant pathology, horticulture and plant sciences. Also,

students have the option of combining an M.B.A degree with any other academic discipline to prepare themselves for a broader range of future employment opportunities.

How can the University of Illinois increase student enrollment?

Recruiting can be difficult given the student profile (i.e., academic record) needed to gain admission to the University of Illinois. Transfer students from the state's junior colleges are probably going to be the best source for future recruiting. Many students' choice of a college program is strongly influenced by their supervisor at the place where they first realized that turf management was a career opportunity.

We hope that those supervisors will recommend the University of Illinois as the best place for those students to attend.

In conclusion, Dr. Branham's comments obviously reflect a commitment to two of his primary responsibilities: research and student training. His comments also demonstrate that there are many challenges along the way to fulfilling his responsibilities. With the shrinking federal and state budgets, support from the private sector will be an important component of his and the entire faculty's success in the years ahead. As one who has personally benefited greatly from the turfgrass program at the University of Illinois, I intend to work with others in the state to show my support. ■

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