

States act to stop weed threat in foreign seeds

BY MARK LESLIE

Beware of seed mixtures when they include tall fescue from Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Chile, experts are telling golf course superintendents and others in the lawn care industry.

Nine states from Maryland to Washington have enacted emergency legislation slamming the door on serrated tussock, a deadly toxic weed that was discovered in a shipment of tall fescue from Argentina to the United States.

So far, Mississippi, Illinois, Tennessee, Alabama and Oregon, Missouri and Oklahoma have joined Maryland and Washington in the ban of serrated tussock.

More are expected to follow.

Meanwhile, the federal government has acted to stop marketing of the weed. Chuck Havens, chief operations officer for the Plant Protection and Quarantine Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said, "The Federal Noxious Weed Act lists noxious weeds, and this (serrated tussock) is one of them now. No one can import them or move them from state to state... As far as we know, we have corralled the problem with maybe one small exception... There's a possibility there's some out there we don't know about and it would not be illegal to sell, but of all we know about and have issued orders on, it would be illegal to sell."

Havens said more than 600,000 pounds of the contaminated seed were shipped in 26 lots to seven U.S. importers and escaped detection because the United States had never before imported fescue. The prolonged drought in the United States brought the imports and, Havens said, "In the system and in our regulatory approach, we missed the first few lots that came through last October-November... Some of this stuff got through, and at that point we alerted the states and they went out and tested."

Serrated tussock, a perennial with unusual drought and herbicide resistance, has caused problems in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina, and Joe B. Hardy Jr., director of the Bureau of Regulatory Services in Mississippi's Department of Agriculture and Commerce, said New South Wales has "a tremendous area that's quarantined."

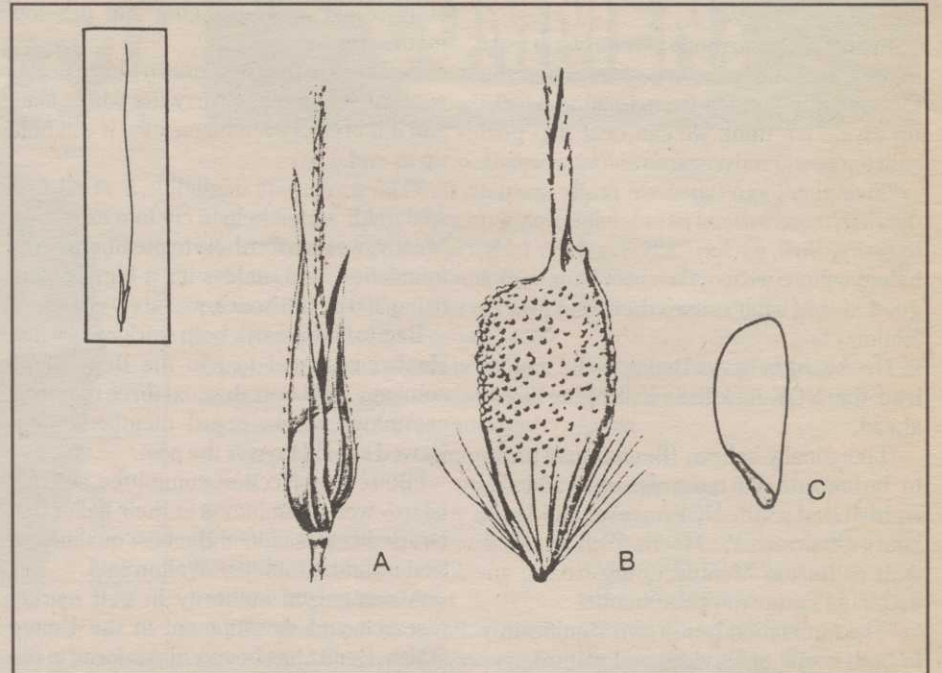
Hardy agreed with Haven that the infected seeds that got into the country is "an isolated case."

But a red flag has been run up by Dale Kern, president of Seed Technology, Inc., an independent seed testing laboratory in Marysville, Ohio, that specializes in turf.

Kern foresees a fivefold increase in imported seed over the next three years because of a probable field-burning ban in Oregon, and added, "Unfortunately, as we see more and more imported seed enter the country, serrated tussock may be only the tip of the iceberg."

And when asked about the effect of increases in imported seeds, Haven said manpower could become a major problem for the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service.

Serrated tussock has the potential to be a particular threat to U.S. turf managers, Kern said. Its aggressive, clumpy spread under dry conditions is bad news enough, but research has also documented that it is fatal to sheep and causes stall-out in cattle, he said.



This is how serrated tussock looks in its various stages of development: (A) spikelet, six times the real size; (B) floret, 16 times the real size; and (C) caryopsis, 16 times the real size.

"Turf managers might be concerned about this even if they aren't anywhere near a farm," Kern said, because the weed's toxicity to deer, rabbits and other wildlife is uncertain and no selective control is known.

Kern said the weed is "truly a potential threat to the golf course. If the golf course superintendent knows that the tall fescue he orders is coming out of Washington, Oregon or Idaho, no problem. But the problem is that when he asks for a mixture, the certification chain is broken, because in order to mix what he wants for his golf course they have to break those bags and take those (certification) tags off; and once you do that you lose identification. And if a company has tall fescue and has bought some from Argentina, they unknowingly could mix it with good home-grown seed and end up contaminating good clean seed."

Roy Cole, senior operations officer working with Havens, said that "with normal, routine maintenance, (serrated tussock) would never go to seed."

American Seed Trade Association Executive Vice President William T. Schapaugh said that in the shipments where serrated tussock was discovered, the U.S. Department of Agriculture required the importers and labelers of the seed to recall it and dispose of it.

"It's fair to say the actions that were taken were proper," Schapaugh said.

Kern of Seed Technology said, "I'm concerned because these countries have a different set of weeds than we have. When you go through the USDA list of noxious

weeds they surveyed worldwide there are 800 (found outside the United States) we want to watch. Whether they are going to be found in turf grasses is going to depend on those growers (contracted by U.S. seed companies). If they've got good growers and they do a good job, then it's never going to appear here."

He said that in Australia alone, 184 potentially serious weeds are known that do not appear in U.S. noxious weeds classifications. Argentina lists 60, South Africa 79 and New Zealand up to 50.

"It's more important than ever to keep prohibited weeds lists updated in a timely way," he cautioned.

Kern suggested options to turf managers in addition to pressing to keep noxious weed lists updated. He said they can buy certified seed, specifying that the tagged analysis still be on the bag. If they choose instead to sample their own seed, they can have it tested for contaminants by a state lab or an independent testing laboratory.

"Some of these weeds may be very difficult or impossible to eradicate once they're in your turf," Kern said. "Nine-tenths of the battle is prevention."

Haven said APHIS inspectors check a "relatively large sample, taking some from a number of bags in a shipment, mixing it together and testing it. That's a pretty standard worldwide way of testing seed."

But with the predicted large increases in seed imports, added manpower in the APHIS ranks may be necessary to keep noxious weeds out of the country.

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Oregon

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Seed growers must burn their fields each fall to purge them of the weeds and disease that endanger the grass seeds. Without this process the industry is in serious danger.

"We need to tell people in the state of Oregon that they really don't want to ban this industry, because it means a lot," said a spokesman for the Oregon Fine Fescue Commission. "People don't know this industry contributes \$750 million a year to the Oregon economy, or that we are raising seed that is shipped to every state in the nation and to 60 foreign countries. They only know the field-burning part."

"There are more than 300,000 acres of

grass seed in this state that pay property taxes; they pay for schools, fire departments ... emergency services and a lot more. And where are they going to replace that revenue that those growers are paying?"

The state's five grass seed commissions — Oregon Ryegrass, Tall Fescue, Fine Fescue, Highland Bentgrass and Orchard Grass commissions — are raising money through members and others in the industry to fund an educational advertising campaign.

Meanwhile, legislators, industry officials and field-burning proponents are negotiating.

If the field-banning legislation does not

pass, the law will remain as it is now — at 250,000 burnable acres costing \$3.50 per acres.

But two petitions that would ban are being circulated; and if the necessary 63,000 signatures are collected on those petitions by the deadline of July 1990, voters will decide the issue in the November 1990 election.

That means the debate on the issue will be going on during the fall field-burning. "The timing couldn't be worse," an OFFC spokesman said.

Contributions can be sent to: Oregon Seed Council, 866 Lancaster SE, Salem, Ore. 97301.