

# GOLF COURSE NEWS

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### MCNABB EARNS HIGHEST HONOR

Richard McNabb (right) is the latest to earn the prestigious Master Greenkeeper status. For story, see page 15.

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### GRADUATION REPORT

## Trained irrigation techs, mechanics in demand

By PETER BLAIS

Shovel jockey. Wrench turner.

Not particularly flattering titles for the people who fill the roles of irrigation technician and turf equipment manager. But if educators, course managers and others have their way, *shovel jockey* and *wrench turner* could go the way of *greenkeeper* in the near future.

With superintendents increasingly strapped to their desks by administrative duties, the cry is going out for college-trained irrigation and maintenance equipment specialists who can work with today's high-tech watering and turf maintenance equipment.

"I'd kill for a formally trained irrigation technician," said Ray Davies, head superintendent at Merced (Calif.) Golf & Country Club. "Irrigation is critical. When you look at a well-manicured golf course, it

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## RTC's Kiawah auction scheduled for May 19

By PETER BLAIS

CHARLESTON, S.C. — The prestigious Ocean Course at Kiawah Island is scheduled to go back on the auction block May 19.

A dozen parties interested in becoming the new owners of the Pete Dye-designed layout and site of the 1991 Ryder Cup attended a bidder's conference here in early April. Among the potential bidders were course owners, management companies, local golf industry veterans and individuals with no ties to the golf business.

"Those who haven't been in the golf business before may see this as a chance to get into the industry in a big way," said Tom Harris, senior vice president of golf properties with CB Commercial, which is marketing the property through its 150 worldwide offices. "Those who weren't in the business seemed well qualified, financially, to enter it."

Financial capability is one of the requirements the winning bidder must demonstrate before the

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### A PEARL IN THE EAST

Dragon Pearl Golf Club, located outside Bangkok, Thailand, is one of the courses making a name for designer Jim Engh, who cut his teeth with IMG and Cotton Pennink. For more on a member of golf architecture's new breed, see page 45.

## Supers turn OSHA regs to their budgetary advantage

By MARK LESLIE

While state and federal legislators struggle with weighing the costs and benefits before passing new laws, golf course superintendents may actually save their clubs money following suggestions from safety experts like Occu-

pational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) personnel.

By investing about \$1,500 a year for four or five years, his former club saved \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year in insurance costs, said Ray Davies, now superintendent at Lake Merced (Calif.) Golf & Country Club.

Referring to his old employer, Virginia Country Club in Huntington Beach, Calif., Davies said: "We didn't have a negative attitude. Just the opposite. From my viewpoint, it saves you money in the long run."

Complying with OSHA standards is "something

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Mike Robinson

## Oregon ryegrass growers organize bargaining group

By HAL PHILLIPS

ALBANY, Ore. — Here in the Willamette Valley, the microeconomics of low carry-over inventory and a 1995 bumper crop have taken a back seat to the macroeconomics of floor prices, overproduction and their affects on the old standby, supply and demand. The result will likely be higher ryegrass prices this fall — maybe as much as 10 cents per pound, according to industry experts.

One reason? Seed growers here have organized the Perennial Ryegrass Bargaining Association (PRBA), which instituted a minimum price of 45 cents a pound in response to the gradual decline in perennial ryegrass prices. The PRBA has reserved the right to raise or lower that figure come August.

Seed dealers, those firms that market seed to golf course superintendents, view this development with mixed feelings. In time of poor supply, floor prices have little relevance. But in the long term, many

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## Seed growers organize bargaining association

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dealers see the PRBA initiative as tampering with the principles of supply and demand. Besides, they argue, a few good crops and dealers will be paying 45 cents per pound for seed worth 43 cents or less.

"The growers are producing too much perennial ryegrass — that's the problem here," said Mike Robinson, president of Corvallis-based Seed Research of Oregon. "As a group, what they should be doing is controlling the acreage of production. Take 10 percent and devote it to something else. That will help the price of ryegrass in the long term. Instead — and we see this all the time — if the price of annual ryegrass goes up one year, they all plant annual ryegrass. Then the price goes down."

Bob Richardson, vice president and general manager of Great Western Seed, a wholly owned subsidiary of Lofts, Inc., agreed that oversupply plays a role, but he noted that bans on field burning and certain chemicals have definitely increased grower costs.

"Growers feel their costs are such that they need their fields fully operational every year," said Richardson. "This is heavy, wet soil and it's not like they could plant a wheat crop. If they could put in a summer fallow situation, that would be the best option. But their costs are too high already."

PRBA Executive Director Jim Carnes admits there is more acreage of perennial ryegrass in Oregon than ever before. But he also sees the institution of floor prices as a positive development for both growers and dealers.

"All we're looking for is a factor of stabilization in the marketplace," explained Carnes, the wild card in this real-world economic debate. Carnes was elected executive director of the PRBA at the organization's first annual meeting in

February. He's also the retired founder of Halsey-based International Seed, one of the companies now sitting across the table from the PRBA.

"With a floor price and a market price to be determined later, a grower is basically growing for a dealer. Anytime there's a minimum price, the growers have a right to negotiate what that market price should be. That's according to the Oregon Supreme Court."

While they have been encouraged to support the fledgling organization, many seed companies contend the PRBA is not about bargaining; it's about arbitrary price fixing. Further, seed dealers point out that a great many growers — traditionally an extremely independent lot — are not participating in the PRBA. Robinson said he believes no more than 40 percent of growers have signed on. Carnes said he has 50 percent of the contracted acreage.

In either case, like the growers, seed companies are an extremely independent bunch. Consequently, assessments of the PRBA tend to vary.

"We have to see how flexible the growers can be in low markets," said Rich Underwood, president of International Seed. "If we decide we need to decrease production and the growers aren't listening, we can't control production. We have high and low markets in agriculture, and we'll see how they handle it."

"From a marketing standpoint, if I know what my costs are going to be, [a floor price] makes my job easier. And if I know what everyone else's costs are going to be, it creates a level playing field. I can put on my margin and away we go."

With the new, higher floor price now in place and ryegrass predicted to be scarce this fall, will seed companies simply pass on price increases to their buyers, i.e. superintendents?

"Absolutely," said Carnes. "Seed companies can get their margins up. And there isn't one of them who doesn't need to increase their margins... Golf courses have to be green. The main cost of keeping it green is fertilizers and chemicals, not seed."

Richardson agrees: "The ultimate result is, superintendents will have to start budgeting more money for seed. I bet golf courses are looking at 10 cents extra per pound. And it should kick in this July, August or September."

Robinson disagrees: "If we raise prices, the superintendent will simply use less seed. He's got a budget. I've seen this before. The superintendent will cut back on his usage."

•••

Seed companies are taking price hits on both ends of the market, said Richardson. While the growers are taking margin away at one end, golf course buying groups — like those organized by larger management companies and the National Golf Course Owners Association — have negotiated lower seed prices at the other end of the spectrum.

"They're getting squeezed," said Richardson, "and they have to pass the costs along."

Further, the PRBA didn't materialize out of thin air, said Underwood.

"I think the dealers may have brought this situation on themselves by trying to sell cheaper than each other," he said. "And instead of taking those costs out of their own margins, they tried to take it

from the grower."

Robinson said he wishes the Perennial Ryegrass Bargaining Association would pay more attention to the third word in its title.

"They call it a bargaining association, but they just tell us what they want," he said. "If the seed companies did that as a group, they'd call it anti-trust... A lot of seed companies are looking for other areas to grow grass seed. They're looking at New Zealand and Canada."

Foreign growing markets are an option, but it's unclear whether the cost of freight would scuttle attempts to save on the production end. The situation is slightly more promising for dealers in Canada where the dollar has fallen along with America's. However, if Canadian currency rebounds, seed companies will find themselves right back where they started — struggling with shrinking margins.

Other bargaining associations have come and gone in the Willamette Valley, but never has one held together this long or effectively. And none has been so well positioned.

"Their timing has been perfect," said Richardson. "We've had excellent fall demand. We've had excellent spring demand. The fall will be very busy."

"Companies have a choice of whether to cooperate with the bargaining association. Most of these growers grow for two or three companies at a minimum... If company A says it will go along, their stuff will get cleaned first. If company B says no, they'll probably have to wait their turn."

## Packaging prices

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predicted continued higher prices for the rest of 1995 and into 1996.

Several pulp producers have announced an additional price increase of \$100/ton effective June 1.

As pulp prices continue to rise, they will have a direct effect on prices for some special paper grades, such as the bleached white paper sheets used as the outside printed ply in many seed bags for brand identification and high quality color graphic design. As of March 8, seed companies could expect to pay between 40 cents and 50 cents per bag, depending on such factors as quantities, bag size and construction.

At a recent meeting of the Independent Professional Seedsmen's Association, Paul McDonald of Repap Manitoba reported that while European and North American manufacturers of coated paper increased their capacity 40 percent between 1987 and 1993 (raising output from 14 million tons in 1987 to 21 million tons in 1993), they are now operating at 95-100 percent of their capacity, depending on the grade of paper. McDonald said coated paper prices have risen sharply and are expected to continue growing.

McDonald pointed out that linerboard

is the most important component of the container board market regarding its relationship to Kraft paper because of its "swing machines." Swing machines can make either linerboard or Kraft paper depending on market conditions.

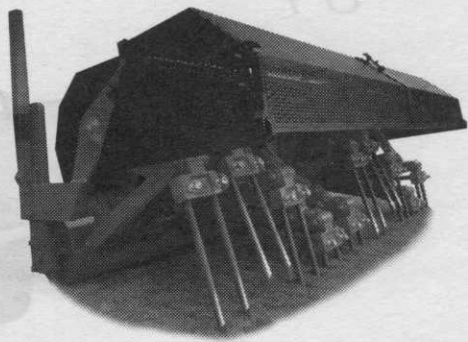
Linerboard production in the United States increased to more than 22 million tons in 1994. McDonald said the box market, which is growing about 5 percent annually and which has low inventories, has produced high operating rates and increasing prices. But, new capacity of more than one million tons is expected to be added this year.

A recent survey by the American Forest and Paper Association indicates that unbleached Kraft paper (the major component of seed bags) capacity will be about 220,000 tons less than previously forecast. McDonald explained this reduction is due to capacity that has shifted to liner-board production.

He pointed out that if shipments of unbleached Kraft paper remain constant this year, the operating rate will increase from 88.6 percent to almost 93 percent. Therefore, the Kraft paper market is expected to remain strong. McDonald suggested this cycle should peak in late 1995 or early 1996.

Strong demand for ethylene, combined with several serious unexpected events at the major petroleum companies, also has driven up prices for polyethylene producers and their ultimate customers (such as seed companies who use polyethylene liners in their seed bags).

Lynn Grooms is editor of Seed World magazine. The above story was reprinted with her permission.




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