

GCN JUNE

Industry seeks alternatives to field burning

By BOB SPIWAK

OLYMPIA, Wash. — A Washington Department of Ecology ruling which would eliminate burning of Kentucky bluegrass fields could have a severe impact on growers here. The ban, initiated last year, requires growers to reduce the number of acres burned by one-third each year, with a total ban by 1998.

Field burning has been the traditional way to eliminate post-harvest straw from the fields, at the same time killing pests and diseases. Some growers maintain that the fires also promote new growth and better yields. Some 60,000 acres in Washington are affected.

Ironically, no such action is contemplated by the state of Idaho, which shares the Rathdrum Prairie with its Washington neighbor. Thus, an imaginary state line separates a 10,000-acre plain, with burning allowed east of the line, but not west.

According to Linda Clovis, executive director of the Intermountain Grass Growers Association, the ban was instituted by then DOE Director Mary Riveland. Clovis maintains that when Washington Gov. Mike Lowry announced he would not seek re-election, Riveland arbitrarily imposed the ban, eliminating public notice and the normal public-hearing procedure. "She knew she'd be out of a job," said Clovis, "and rushed this [ban] through. In my opinion it circumvented due process."

However, according to a January article in the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, a study by several Washington State University professors concluded that benefits gained by reduced field burning outweighed the costs, and this prompted Riveland to mandate the ban.

The phase-out of burning is to allow the growers to devise alternatives. So far, said Skip Allert of Jacklin Seed in Post Falls, Idaho, there has been little success. "Last year," he explained, "they [growers] tried to bale the straw after combining, without much success."

Allert, Jacklin's grower service field representative, said alternative measures such as harvesting straw or plowing cost the growers more and do not kill weed seeds or diseases. Chemical treatments have been tried, but they, too, are coming under fire.

Washington State University and University of Idaho, along with Jacklin, are examining other means. One is close-clipping the grass, then vacuuming the residue. "We need more basic research," said Allert. "What genes we need to change, for instance,

But there is a costly time lag — a year before we get the crop out, another year to see the results."

Asked about the effect the ban will have on bluegrass prices, Allert said Washington bluegrass is not going to be the way

it was. It can be grown in Idaho, but it is just a matter of time until there is a curtailment there as well, he said.

Clovis agreed and said that although no legislative action is pending, a group of environmen-

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Biological firms discovering the 'joys' of FIFRA

By ALAN B. NICHOLS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Squeezed by the high cost of chemicals and environmental/social pressures to reduce their use, a growing number

of golf course superintendents around the country are turning to biocontrol management programs as a supplement to conventional practices.

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Examine the Difference

Burning alternatives

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talists plans a different strategy: suing individual growers when they burn their fields. For now, with only Washington being affected, Clovis believes smaller growers, some of whom may have fields of 20 or so acres, will get out of the business.

Canadians, she said, are keeping an eye on developments in the two states, possibly intending to enter the bluegrass business. The climate is right, and more than 90 percent of all Kentucky bluegrass propagation is in the Pacific Northwest.

Patricia Hoffman heads a citizens group in the Spokane area called Save Our Summers (SOS). Founded in 1995, the group's primary concern is with health. "We founded the organization in response to 30-odd years of grass burning with no concessions [from the growers]," she said. "In 1963 there were only about 16,000 acres being burned in the region, including Idaho. And now the acreage burned is around 100,000."

"There have been fatalities as well," Hoffman said. "Two asthmatics, one in Washington, one in Idaho, died within 12 hours of smoke intrusion. That's a pretty high price to pay for golf courses."

In Idaho, The Clean Air Coalition plans to base lawsuits against growers by invoking the state's trespass law, according to *The North Idaho Business Journal*, "...to prove that the invading smoke constitutes a trespass on another landowner's property."

SOS is attracting more members and now numbers about 1,500. The group was actively lobbying to suppress grass burning, and with the current ban is "very gratified with the Department of Ecology's action."

Bluegrass industry spokespeople regard the conflict as an emotional issue blown out of proportion as a health concern. Countering this, the DOE and SOS feel there is enough evidence to support their contentions that the smoke is indeed harmful to human lungs, especially those of persons with respiratory problems.

EcoSoils

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EcoSoils Systems, Inc. a San Diego technology company, thinks it has solved this challenge with its Bioject Biological Management System. However, EcoSoils must clear a major hurdle — the same hurdle many chemical formulators must clear — before it will see its units in many more golf course irrigation systems.

The company's Bioreactor, first designed to deliver nitrogen fixing microbes to the soil, must be approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA). The company is currently preparing to submit to the agency test protocols and to conduct field testing.

The Bioject Bioreactor automatically dispenses starter cultures of microbes (inoculum) and their required food sources (media) into a fermentation chamber where the microbes grow into high population numbers. Once the desired volume is achieved, the inoculum-laden slurry is spread over the course via the existing irrigation system.

The system is currently in place some 200 courses, including two Chicago facilities: North Shore Country Club in Glenview, Ill., and Congressional Country Club outside Washington, D.C.

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