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THE FARM REPORT

When Joe Purchase asked me during the RISE meeting to come down to FarmLinks and be his playing partner in the inaugural Agrium Advanced Technologies Open at FarmLinks, I tried to be cool and pretend like the thought of four days of golf, fishing and schmoozing in sunny Alabama wasn't exactly what my weary bones needed as Cleveland turned cold and wet.

So I hesitated for at least six seconds before I said "Hell yes."

Agrium put together the event for their big customers and business partners as an old-school networking opportunity: a few days of bonding, pretty much off the grid with no presentations or overt sales push. We played golf, caught a bunch of bass, told each other lies and pretty much everyone but me enjoyed FarmLinks' new attitude about spirit consumption on the premises. (Yes, FarmLinks now has a liquor license.)

The evolution of the world's only research and demonstration golf course continues on many fronts. As you may have read on our website recently, BASF is moving their customer education and interaction activities to Pinehurst to be closer to their Raleigh HQ. I also learned a few weeks ago that Agrium will be "downsizing" their involvement in the program and multiple sources have told me Toro is examining their commitment, as well.

In short, the original partnership concept may have run its course and, although FarmLinks will remain committed to research, information and education for superintendents, David Pursell and his team are now focused on building the facility's reputation as an awesome destination for all types of company outings and events. If you know David, you can't doubt he'll

make it work. He is a man of vision, energy and not insignificant resources. Industry partners or not, FarmLinks will always be a special place for turf-heads to visit and enjoy.

Which brings me back to Joe and his invitation to come to Agrium's big event. Joe is in charge of national sales for AAT and I think the primary reason I was invited was that someone told Joe...get ready for this...that I was a good stick and I could help his team. (I'll pause for a second and wait for you to stop laughing.) He soon learned the truth about my game (or lack thereof) and we wisely turned our attention to talking about the market, the changes in the fertilizer business

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going on right now and how Agrium is positioning itself for the future.

The first and foremost thing I learned from Joe and his colleague Jeff Novak, Agrium's VP of marketing, is that it's all about the price of corn. Ethanol drives corn prices, corn prices drive more acreage, more acreage demands more fertilizer, and high demand in ag means higher prices and shorter supplies for weird little markets like ours. Prices for traditional urea-based products have also spiked with the cost of natural gas, which is critical to the production process. The bottom line is that it's like pump prices for gas: a million variables impact the price, it's complex, and there's almost nothing a consumer can do to avoid it.

Almost nothing. AAT is changing the way it does business to bring some sanity to the process in the golf, lawn care and nursery markets. Notably, they've established new supply partnerships to solidify their material sources. But, the bigger challenge is to educate superintendents and other T&O professionals about the ROI of newer, more expensive slow-release technologies like Polyon and Duration. To do so, they have to convince customers to do math.

"It's a business decision for our customers that forces a lot of them to change the way they've approached fertilization," says Purchase. "We're trying to help superintendents and LCOs justify one or two more-expensive rounds versus five or six less-expensive rounds. We're helping them document application costs, manpower costs, fuel costs and other factors like overwintering. It's a big change that gives them a way to improve their economics and profitability."

The company has launched a slick website (spreaditandforgetit.com) with a calculator function for those who are math-challenged. The bottom line is get over the sticker shock of a higher price per bag and look at the whole economic picture. "We have to give customers a way to smooth out the peaks and valleys of urea pricing," Novak says. We need to bring some predictability to what has been a crazy ride for turf managers."

The Agrium folks realize they aren't the only ones selling coated technologies and they're perfectly willing to help be a rising tide to lift all boats. "In the long run, between environmental restrictions, labor and fuel costs, the benefits will become clear," says Purchase. "We're bullish about the green industry because of that." GCI