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SEEDS OF TROUBLE

Let's take a little trip in Mr. Peabody's WABAC machine and go back a quarter-century to the halcyon days of 1989.

Mikhail Gorbachev took the reins of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall soon fell. A few brave Chinese students faced down tanks in Tiananmen Square. People had big hair.

In our happy little business, new facility construction was zipping right along despite little setbacks like the fact the "Savings & Loan Crisis" briefly made Uncle Sam the largest course owner in the world. (Every new housing development had to have a golf course to anchor it, right?) Even attacks by the legendary but slightly loony broadcaster Paul Harvey couldn't dim the prospects of development. New courses sprung up because, as one of the year's best movies, "Field of Dreams," told us, "if you build it, they will come."

Many aspects of the turf business were flying high, but none more so than seed production. New courses, expansions, remodeling and the growth of overseeding drove seed sales and fueled a boom in research and development.

At the time, I served on the USGA Research Committee and we saw endless proposals for breeding studies to develop drought-tolerant, salt-tolerant, cold-tolerant, endophytically-enhanced, glyphosate-resistant, low-grow, no-mow, glow-in-the-dark turf species. If you could dream it, some PhD up in Oregon was figuring out how to splice and dice genetic material together to create it. New species poured out of a dozen or more big, profitable seed companies in the Willamette Valley and universities around the nation. Times were good

and most folks were fat and happy.

Just 25 years later, the picture is very different. We overbuilt. We overdesigned. We overmaintained. Now we're in an era when new construction is rarer than a pink unicorn, minimalism and naturalism are crowding out the manicured look, pigments are the new overseeding and maintained acreage nationally goes down a little every day.

On top of that, as our cover story details, the seed business has its own set of issues created by other factors, notably the spectacularly successful corn/ethanol lobby. What, you ask, does ethanol have to do with why it's going to be tough and expensive to find seed this spring? Read the story, but the short answer is: Everything.

Other factors like consolidation, competition in the global market from overseas growers and slashed research budgets at universities are also cramping the style of the once-booming turf seed market. Times have most definitely changed.

Yet, despite those challenges, there is great opportunity within the seed market in the future. The single largest threat to the future of golf is the cost and availability of water. Without action on many fronts, it's entirely possible that many thirsty areas of the country will eventually decide that golf courses don't deserve to use fresh water.

Think I'm exaggerating? Think again. Yes, we can show that courses benefit the environment, create jobs and help communities and that's important to our future as regulated water users. Yes, golfer attitudes might gradually become more accepting of a different standard. Maybe the big show down in Pinehurst this

June will move the dial back toward a center-line maintenance philosophy utilizing fewer heads and irrigating less turf. And yes, the Coore/Crenshaw/Doak/Hanse/Kidd design trend of "less is more" will continue and that will help.

But none of that will matter if we don't have turf types that allow us to use less water or be able to grow more turf using non-potable water. Drought-resistant and salt-tolerant species must be developed to ensure that golf continues to be played on natural grass in the days ahead when courses everywhere – South and North – will be irrigated with wastewater or they won't be irrigated at all.

The Holy Grail for golf's future might be something akin to a cool-season *Paspalum*. Is it possible to develop bent or *Poa* that can withstand the salts and metals in wastewater? Can we somehow stimulate chlorophyll to maintain a green appearance without all the H₂O? Could hybrids that intersperse natural grass into a synthetic base be acceptable for fairways? Can roughs simply become, er, roughs, with little maintenance other than the occasional mow?

I honestly believe that turf science holds the answers to those questions. The problem is whether we can fund their development and figure how to make it profitable for farmers to once again grow turf instead of the corn or soybeans that have crowded it out up in the fertile fields of the Northwest.

I hope in 2039 we can look back and find that 2014 was the beginning of a new golden era of turf breeding when solutions were created to protect and preserve our game and our business. We need to start now... because the clock is ticking. **GCI**