

Off The Fringe

Business briefs

Deere refocuses GPS Research

Moline, Ill.-based John Deere Co. announced that it will shift its energies from developing GPS technology for golf cars to developing it for its turf equipment.

A company spokesperson said Deere will stop pursuing its SkyLinks GPS golf car system, which allowed golfers to measure distances from their cars to pins, fairways or hazards. Instead, Deere wants to add GPS tracking ability to its maintenance equipment to focus on its main customers — superintendents and landscape contractors. This will allow them to add maintenance vehicle tracking, as well as precision mowing and spraying applications, to its existing line of turf equipment.

Deere says it will continue to support courses that currently employ the SkyLinks system.

In other Deere news, the company acquired Alpharetta, Ga.-based McGinnis Farms, a provider of products and services to landscape and irrigation professionals; and Jeffersonville, Ind.-based Great Dane Power Equipment Co., which manufactures mowing equipment.

GCSAA membership reaches 21,000

Continuing a trend of membership growth that began in the mid-1990s, GCSAA announced the association's membership has climbed past the 21,000 mark. Since January 1994, GCSAA membership has grown 58 percent (up from 13,300).

United Seed Production formed

United Horticultural Supply has announced a strategic agreement with a newly formed company, United Seed Production, which provides it with marketing rights to myriad grass seed varieties.

Chain Reaction

GAS CRISIS FUELS FERTILIZER PRICE INCREASE

By Frank H. Andorka Jr. and Ron Hall

If you think the money you're shelling out for natural gas this winter is outrageous, wait until you try to buy your next bag of fertilizer.

Fertilizer? What possible connection is there between the sticker shock you've experienced this winter and your prices for keeping your turf healthy? The answer, as it turns out, is plenty.

Double and triple-digit increases in natural gas costs are driving nitrogen fertilizer prices up 50 percent or more around the country because natural gas is a critical component of fertilizer production. Natural gas provides anhydrous ammonia, a building block of nearly all nitrogen-based fertilizers. It takes nearly 33,000 cubic feet of gas to produce one ton of the ammonia.

Higher gas costs mean less fertilizer production at higher prices, according to Jim Montgomery, president of Greensmiths, a Frisco, Texas-based company that specializes in solving water and soil problems.

"We're looking at the likelihood of at least double the usual price for fer-

tilizer," Montgomery says. "Manufacturers are finding it's more profitable to sell the natural gas stockpiles they ordered last year at low prices than to use that gas to make fertilizer."

Richard D. Harrell, of Grand Rapids, Mich.-based NU-GRO

Technologies, says even the manufacturers aren't sure what the final prices will be.

"Everyone is really stumped on this one," Harrell says. "We do know that the prices are going to go up, but we really don't know by how much."

Although prices may spike this year, they've been creeping up for about a year, says Bill

Hubbell, vice president of service centers for Cleveland-based Lesco.

"It wasn't so noticeable because [the 2000 season] was a soft demand year for fertilizer," Hubbell says. "We had plenty of rain in the North and there was a drought in the South."

So experts are advising to buy as early as possible because prices will continue to rise as the natural gas shortage becomes even more acute. Otherwise, you could be left out in the cold.



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