

Can Cutless Make a Comeback?

By Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor

Ken Mangum misses Cutless. The director of golf courses and grounds and certified superintendent of the Atlanta Athletic Club first used the plant growth regulator (PGR) in the early 1980s under an experimental use permit, which allowed its original producer, Elanco, to test the product on golf courses. He loved its growth control. He loved the richly colored turf it created. He loved the denser, healthier turf it provided.

The only problem was price. Mangum says the high rates necessary for adequate control cost him a bundle, and it became hard to justify that cost to his members.

"I told my sales representative at the time that I loved his product, but I had to stop using it because of the cost," Mangum says. "I told him that the company that came out with an affordable regulator would corner the market."

His prediction became reality in the early 1990s. That was when Ciba (now Syngenta) introduced Primo to the market, and it quickly became the gold standard of PGRs. But there are still days when Mangum longs for Cutless.

"If someone could figure out a way to lower the cost, I'd start using it again," Mangum says. "I don't think it would ever replace Primo, but it would be nice to have it back in the market as an alternative."

Well, Mangum's wish came true. In January, Indianapolis-based SePRO finished the transaction to purchase the product from its owner, Dow AgroSciences, which marketed the product after a merger with Elanco. SePRO now plans to start an aggressive marketing campaign to reintroduce it to superintendents. But with Primo dominating the market, can Cutless make a significant comeback?

Why it left

Roger Storey, vice president of business development for SePRO, says most of the

With new applications and a potential cost reduction, one company is betting the growth regulator still has a market

company's executives know Cutless well because they have worked with the compound before at either Elanco or Dow AgroSciences. When it was first introduced in the late 1980s, Cutless was primarily used to reduce clippings on fairways.

"It was one of the higher-profile roll-outs we did at the time," Storey says. "We kept hearing from superintendents about the added benefits they found from using it, particularly in the area of turf color, density and overall quality. We made a serious push for it."

When Elanco and Dow AgroSciences merged, Cutless' marketing efforts lost steam, Storey says. "Dow had other priorities at the time," Storey says.

Ray Cooper, former head of Elanco's turf and ornamental research-and-development division, admits he hated to see the product leave the market when Dow scaled back its emphasis on the product in the early 1990s.

"I thought it had potential that had never been realized," Cooper says. "It was certainly never maximized."

Cooper, who now heads his own company called TotalTurf Consulting in Hilton Head, S.C., says the limited focus of product uses exacerbated the problem.

"It was never a front-line product, either for Elanco or Dow," Cooper says. "It was a solid, niche-market performer, but the companies limited its use primarily to golf course fairways. If you think about it, that's not a big market."

Cooper also says the labeling required end-users to apply Cutless at high rates, which increased the overall cost of the product. In his mind, the cost objection was a key reason that Cutless didn't gain greater market share.

Superintendents found they could receive similar benefits from Primo that they received from Cutless at a lower price, Cooper says. "That's when Dow reduced its marketing and sales effort until it was virtually nonexistent by the mid-1990s," he adds.

Why it's back

Storey says SePRO believes that by expanding the market beyond superintendents into other applications and combining it in rotation with other PGRs, Cutless will make a successful comeback.

"We want to expand it into the greenhouse and landscape markets in addition to the golf market," Storey says. "But

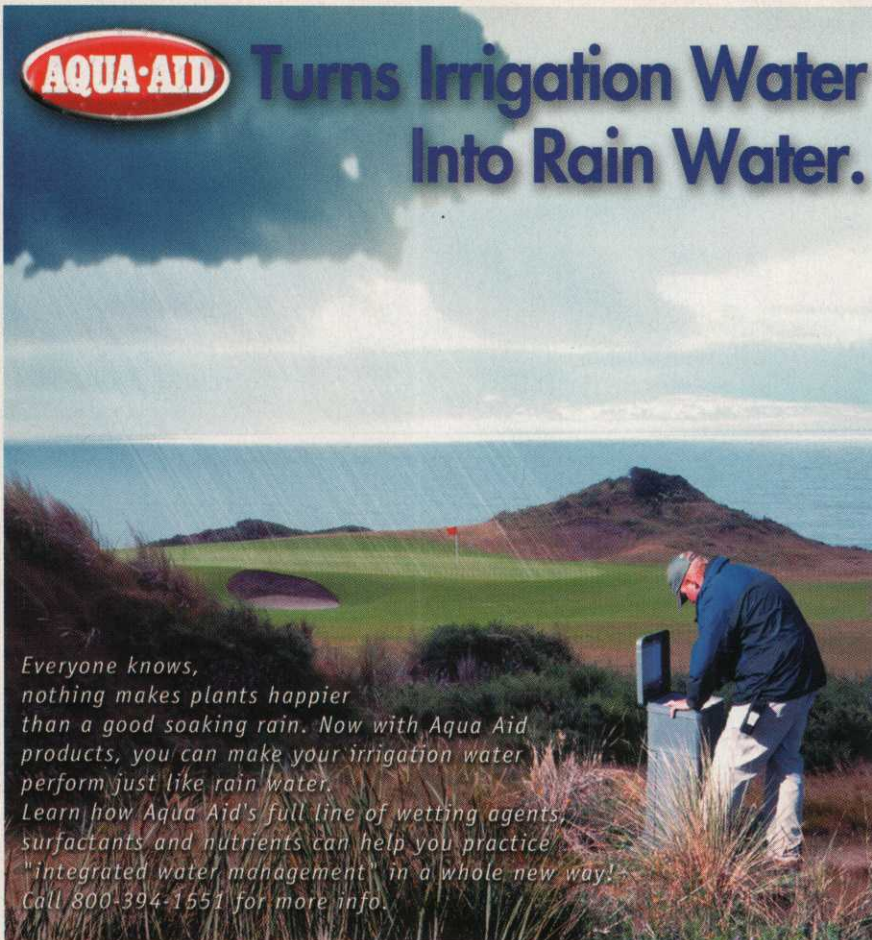
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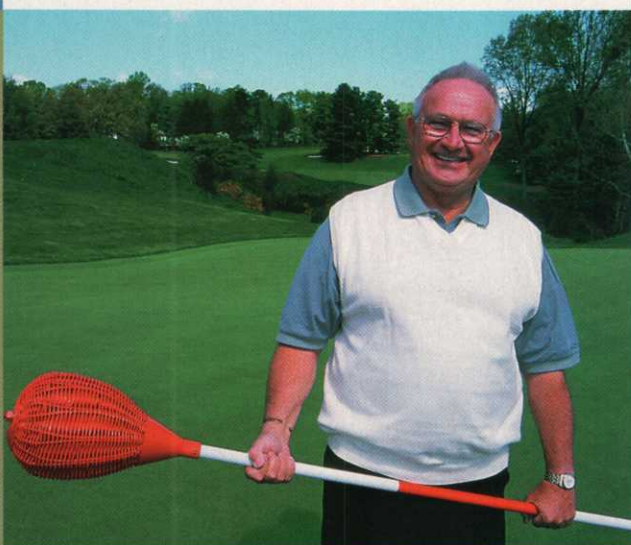
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we also think we can expand its reach in the golf market with specific uses that will help superintendents."

Storey says early feedback from superintendents during the most recent research efforts shows Cutless is an effective *Poa annua* suppression tool, according to Storey. He believes superintendents who want to convert their *Poa annua*-infested greens and fairways to cool-season perennial turfgrasses will find Cutless a great aid.

Perhaps the most important application of Cutless, however, would be in a rotation or tank mix with Primo to combat the rebound effect some superintendents are experiencing, Storey says. The rebound effect is when turf grows quickly at the end of a PGR cycle, causing flush top growth. Storey says he believes a rotation of Primo and Cutless could help control the problem, while providing a darker green, denser turf for a longer period of time than other PGRs.

"We're not looking to displace Primo," Storey says. "The two chemistries complement each other well, and we're hoping superintendents can use them in tandem."

Cooper says the treatment protocol he's currently testing would involve a rotation of four to five applications of Primo and Cutless, with three applications of Primo and two of Cutless. The rotation, using lower rates, will reduce the per-application price of Cutless, which will address the price concerns its old customers faced.

SePRO is also looking to expand Cutless' use as a tree growth regulator. During its original release, its use on trees wasn't well-publicized, but it works well in limiting the number of prunings, Cooper says. "While it will help landscapers more by reducing pruning frequency and volume, it will certainly help superintendents tame unruly trees," Cooper adds.

Mangum says he can't wait to see what the new Cutless will look like — and what the cost will be when he uses the new application program. ■

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