

Weird Science?

Not at all. BlueYellow is just a new and inventive way to grow turf

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

There's something strange and *X File*-ish going on near the sixth tee of The Ponte Vedra Club Golf Resort. There are long strips of what look like thin, white cotton sheets tacked to the ground. It looks like some scientific experiment is being conducted. Hey, is that Mulder and Scully over there?

There is an experiment of sorts going on, but it's nothing that's out of this world. But then again, some people might say that the product being tested on the Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., golf course is out of this world — at least this turf world.

The product in question is called BlueYellow (Why BlueYellow? More on that later.),

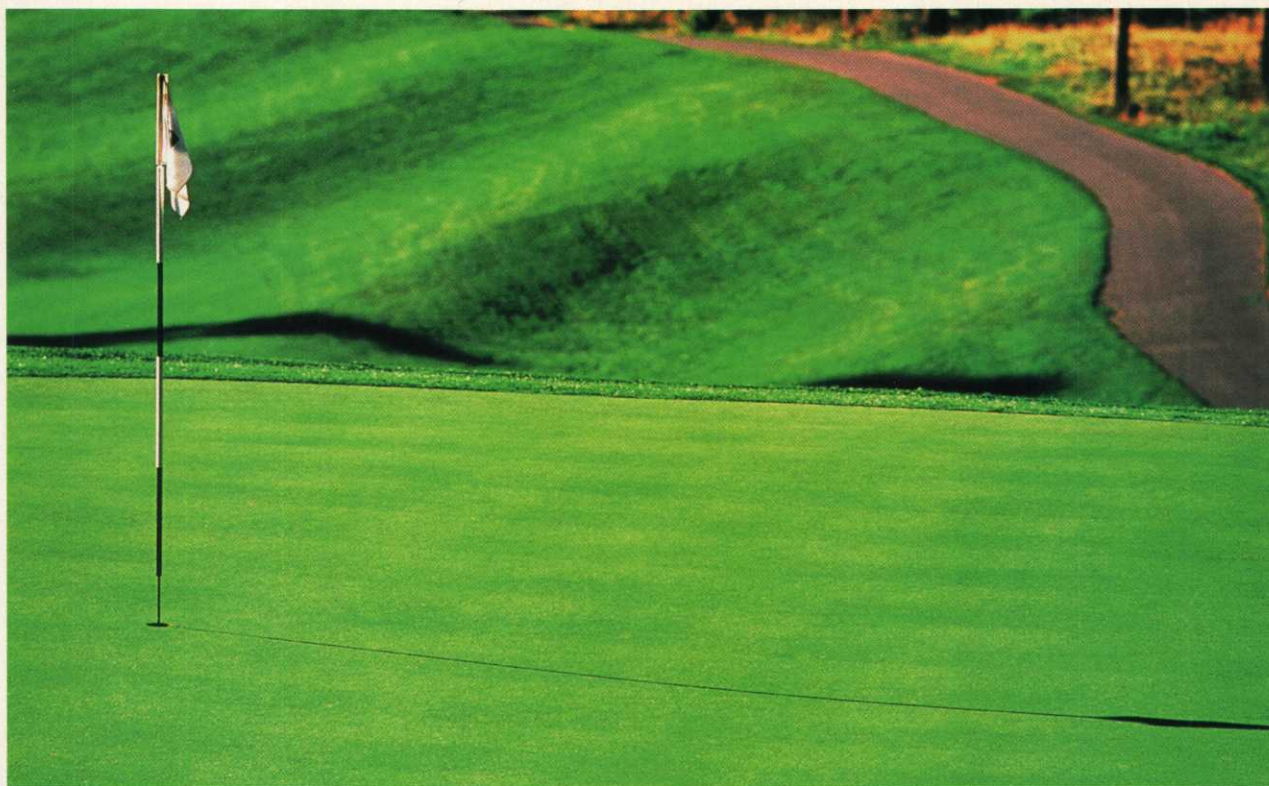
and is manufactured by Brunswick, Ga.-based Koch Cellulose. While a strip of BlueYellow does resemble a cotton sheet, it's actually manufactured of a biodegradable cellulose-based substrate. It's what's in the substrate — a calibrated distribution of custom-blended grass and fertilizer — that has caught the golf turf industry's attention.

Turf professionals tout the engineered turf system's one-step solution for turf establishment. BlueYellow, while not seed or sod, falls between those two entities. It's an alternative to conventional seeding and sodding. When the seed- and fertilizer-laden substrate is applied to a prepared area and irrigated, it adheres to the soil. The substrate secures the seed and fertilizer in place, which enhances germination, according to Peter Abitz, commercial director of BlueYellow.

Roll out the BlueYellow: One thing turf professionals like about the product is that it's less labor-intensive.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KOCH CELLULOSE



The substrate maintains its form for a few weeks before decomposing. In that time, however, the seed and fertilizer is protected from wind, washouts and other elements inflicted by Mother Nature. BlueYellow can prevent two dirty words that cause superintendents, architects and builders to cringe when they hear them — “run-off” and “rework.”

It's less labor-intensive because it's a one-step process and can be easily applied (it's simply rolled out on the ground like a tarp). BlueYellow also doesn't require heavy equipment to install.

BlueYellow isn't inexpensive, and it's not meant to be, says Marsha Seekins, vice president of sales for Koch Cellulose. The installed price of BlueYellow falls between the installed price of seed and sod.

“We're not trying to sell BlueYellow on price,” Seekins says. “We're trying to sell it as a solution to high-quality turf. We recognize that we need to stay cost-competitive.”

A flexible product

The wind has kicked up on this cool, spring day at the Ponte Vedra Club. But Abitz and others, who are applying the product to a 1,000-square-foot area for a demonstration, are not concerned. The BlueYellow will stay in place after watering.

Abitz bends down and examines a bluegrass/ryegrass mix of BlueYellow that was

planted about four weeks before. The turf is coming in strong despite two weeks of temperatures in the low 40s, and the cellulose substrate has nearly disappeared.

“We're trying to get a good representation of what happens over [certain times] in a grow-in with BlueYellow,” Abitz says. “We're looking for a nice, even grow-in.”

Abitz, a pulp and paper scientist (and former agronomy student at the University of Wisconsin), who played a major part in developing the product, relates a story about successfully laying down the product in a steady 30 mph wind.

BlueYellow has made a believer out of Marc Eubanks, general manager and former director of golf and grounds at The Olde Farm Golf Course in Bristol, Va. Eubanks tested the product on a 20-acre practice facility when it was first developed for the golf market about two years ago.

“We devised a plan to compare it to the various methods of establishing turf,” he says.

Eubanks says he discovered a few problems with the prototype, but he also realized the product had potential. For instance, the substrate decomposed in about 14 days, which was too short, Eubanks says. Koch Cellulose reformulated the substrate so it now lasts about 24 days.

Eubanks says BlueYellow is reliable. “The distribution of the fertilizer and the seed is highly

BlueYellow can be custom-blended with particular seed and fertilizer for use on any part of the course.

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accurate — more accurate than we could ever do with our normal processes,” he says.

A short time after the product was installed at The Olde Farm, a fierce tropical storm blew through and dumped 5 inches of rain on the area in 36 hours. Eubanks figured it would be back to the drawing board for the test. He was surprised he was wrong.

Bobby Weed and Scot Sherman of Weed Golf Course Design, the architects of The Olde Farm, are also proponents of BlueYellow. Sherman says he and Weed are impressed with the product because it provides so much flexibility. A grow-in is risky business, and the weather often dictates when a grow-in can begin. Sherman tells how grow-ins with sod had to be canceled because sod can't be laid in the rain. He also relates stories about how grow-ins with seed went awry because it washed away in rainstorms.

Grassing a golf course is a three-step

process, involving seeding, fertilizing and matting. It's a breakthrough technology when a company has decreased the three steps to one, Sherman stresses.

“[Blue Yellow] gives us the opportunity to make decisions that we weren't able to make because of bad weather,” Sherman says. “In today's world, we have to do things better, faster and more efficiently to keep golf afloat.”

Says Weed, “This method takes all the guesswork out.”

Sherman's point is the game will be more affordable to play if golf courses can be built more quickly and efficiently.

Weed and Sherman like the fact that BlueYellow is less labor-intensive. “As labor-intensive as our business is for contractors and superintendents, anything that can be done to minimize the labor-related aspect of seeding will be beneficial,” Weed says.

Weed says almost everyone involved in golf is sensitive to the fact that the game's costs need to be decreased.

“Everybody benefits anytime we can control costs or keep them in check by coming out with new products,” he adds.

BlueYellow is not a godsend, however, Weed stresses. “No seed can go out without water,” he notes. “You just can't roll it out and come back in a month and expect to mow it. You've got to irrigate it, and it has to stay moist. Once the seed swells, you have to nurture it along.”

Weed and Sherman, who make appearances on behalf of Koch Cellulose to market BlueYellow, are compensated for their time, but both say they wouldn't support a product if they didn't believe in it.

Sherman says it's his and Weed's responsibility to make sure their peers hear about new technology on the market. “This is really a new way of thinking,” Sherman adds.

Word is getting out about BlueYellow. Abitz says the product received a positive reaction from superintendents

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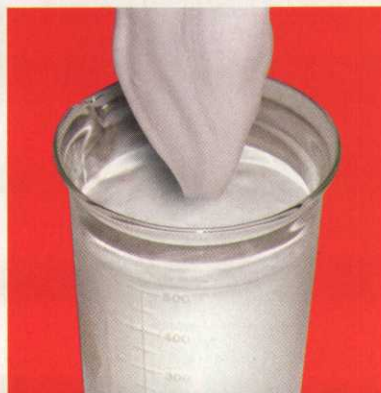
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BlueYellow in progression: A – turf just sprouting; B – turf filling in; and C – turf fully grown at about four weeks.

and others at the GCSAA Conference and Show earlier this year.

Allen Scott, project coordinator for golf course builder Landscapes Unlimited, studied BlueYellow and now a new course his company is building near Roanoke, Va., is using the product on 36 acres of fairways. The course is being built in the mountains, where erosion and wind are common at 3,000 feet. Scott believes the BlueYellow bentgrass blend will stay in place, and he's not worried about seed migration, either.

To accelerate the launch of the product in the golf market, BlueYellow recently joined with John Deere One Source. "John Deere gives us immediate nationwide coverage," says Doug Seekins, BlueYellow's director of manufacturing.

Koch Cellulose plans to market BlueYellow to homeowners soon. Marsha Seekins says the company started with the golf industry because it posed a bigger marketing challenge in its demands for particularities and near-perfect-looking turf.

What if the majority of architects,

superintendents and builders in the golf industry are sold on BlueYellow's capabilities? "It will result in a paradigm shift in the way that we seed," Eubanks predicts.

Says Weed: "Contractors are sophisticated and savvy. If this product is priced properly, they'll quickly get comfortable using it because it eliminates a lot of risk on their part."

Now, back to the name. Why call the product BlueYellow? It's simple: Mix blue with yellow and you soon have green — as in turf. ■

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