

No News Is Good News

Word on the street is that there aren't new chemistries poised to join the pre-emergent herbicide market – but that may just mean what's out there is doing the job

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR

The sounds of silence are pervading the halls of basic chemical manufacturers — at least when it comes to bringing a new pre-emergent herbicide chemistry to market.

There is no single explanation for the lack of new formulations. Some attribute it to changing maintenance practices. Others say there's little impetus to create new chemistries because superintendents seem satisfied with the products currently available. Still others insist that the costs of bringing new chemistries to such a small market are prohibitive. But that doesn't mean there aren't niche markets and small improvements that can be made to current pre-emergent herbicides during the next few years, experts say.

"I'd be hard-pressed to say there's anything new on the horizon on the pre-emergent herbicide front," says Joe DiPaola, golf market manager for Syngenta Professional Products.

Changing practices

Dave Fearis, turf and ornamental products specialist for PBI Gordon, says smaller maintenance budgets are forcing more superintendents to move from



More superintendents are shifting from pre-emergent to postemergent weed control because of cost and environmental concerns.

pre-emergent broadcast herbicide applications to postemergent spot treatments instead. He's not sure the practice is widespread yet, but believes it's more prevalent than some may think.

"When you go with a pre-emergent application, it tends to be over a large area," Fearis says. "That costs more money than going out after the weeds emerge and spot treating those areas. There's a cost factor involved that influences some decisions superintendents have to make."

In fact, George Raymond, business

manager for herbicides and plant growth regulators for Bayer Environmental Sciences, believes superintendents are making a slow, willful decision to reduce the number of pre-emergent herbicides they use. After all, that's what happened in the agricultural market. Farmers discovered that they could get by with putting down less material if they used postemergent products, he says.

"You're seeing a slow, steady movement in that direction in turf as well," Raymond

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says. "Superintendents are working to get their dependence on pre-emergent products down. It will become a permanent change in their habits over time."

But Kyle Miller, senior technical specialist for the turf and ornamental market at BASF, says he doesn't believe superintendents will ever get to the point where they sacrifice the overall look of their golf course to save a few bucks.

"The bottom line is that they still have to have the golf course looking good to their members, or they will be out of jobs," Miller says. "I don't ever see a time when superintendents will go strictly to postemergent herbicides."

Raymond agrees. "Pre-emergent products will always be there, particularly because superintendents don't like to change their programs if they're working."

Stable market

The pre-emergent herbicide market is fairly stable and has been for the past several years, according to the experts. Superintendents seem largely satisfied with the range of products on the market and aren't clamoring for new ones,



Although there's some anecdotal evidence of mild weed resistance, experts say it's unlikely to be a widespread problem.

restrictions on what chemicals golf courses can use.

"As more regulations are being put in place, companies have to get new chemistries approved on a national level and then on a state-by-state basis," Fearis says. "It's far more difficult than it used to be."

Raymond says the one occurrence that could dramatically change the pre-emergent equation was strong evidence

So what's next?

BASF's Miller says companies will tweak their chemistries to extend their usefulness for superintendents. He points to BASF's encapsulation of one of its products to improve the ease of handling of the product and its crabgrass control.

Bayer's Raymond says superintendents will see more companies moving toward combination products to save superintendents time and money by allowing them to do two applications (say, fertilizer and herbicide) for the price of one. He also says companies will focus on trying to lower application rates.

"Superintendents are always looking for materials that will have a lower impact on the environment," Raymond says. "The residuals may not be as long as they were in the past, but the overall environmental impact will be lower. Companies are going to work on meeting that need."

Syngenta's DiPaola says the company will tweak some of its chemistries to meet specific needs in different regions of the country. It will also work to meet emerging uses, such as fall applications to prepare the course for the spring, *Poa annua* management in the mid-Atlantic region and overseeding in the South and West, he adds. "There are some clear regional applications that we intend to explore," DiPaola says.

PBI Gordon's Fearis says that one other factor has influenced the lack of development of new pre-emergent herbicide chemistries over the past few years: the incredible number of chemical company mergers. He says such mergers can often disrupt the research and development flows that existed over the pre-merger companies.

"Maybe after all the companies are integrated from these mergers, there will be a strong movement to create new technologies," Fearis says. "I'm always amazed at what people can do when they set their minds to it."

"Whatever happens, companies will continue to improve their product lines, and that's a good thing for the end-user," he says. ■



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Raymond says. "The time, effort and expense to get new products registered have to be balanced against the size of the market," Raymond says.

Most chemical companies are focusing on markets that offer a quicker return on investment — say, fungicides — because the expense of bringing new chemistries to market has mushroomed. Fearis says costs have grown exponentially as more states impose tighter

of weed resistance. He says he's heard of minor resistance in some cases, but the issue isn't large enough to cause a full-scale revision of products the way it has in the fungicide market. Such problems are unlikely to become widespread for herbicides because weed populations don't reproduce as quickly as fungi. As a result, weeds have fewer opportunities to mutate in response to chemical applications.