

# Midwest flood recovery underway, but will take years

by Jim Parks

AS THE WATER RECEDED and residents of the devastated Mississippi and Missouri basins began to put their lives back together, it was obvious that the Great Flood of 1993 was destined to live in infamy well into the next century.

Folks in the area already were spinning legends about how they were personally impacted by the body blows nature delivered over most of last summer to the nation's midsection. Stories that grandchildren-yet-to-come will hear repeated through their lifetimes were being told.

Scars from swollen rivers fed by incessant rain will remain in memory far longer than they are likely to last in the physical environment. Although few gave immediate priority to repairing the countless hundreds of lawns and other severely damaged turf, there was a belief among the experts that their recovery could occur quickly.

"I would expect that the effects of the floods can be pretty short-term," said Michael Agnew, extension turf grass specialist at Iowa State University.

Repair work, he said, largely is a matter of removing silt, tilling, severely aerating and re-seeding or placing sod. That, he added, "means more business for those companies trying to repair the damage."

A second wave of remedial work is in store as next year promises to bear a bumper crop of crabgrass and broadleaf weeds as a result of the excessive moisture almost continuous rain brought in areas that escaped actual flooding. "They're going to be just rampant. They've taken hold and it won't be easy to control them," he said.

Any prediction of a boon for professional turf providers and retail establishments which serve do-it-yourself

homeowners have to be heavily qualified. The hitch in that scenario has to do with sorting out priorities.

"Repair or replacement [of turf] can be done rather quickly, but you have to remember that getting it done is well down on the list for most people. If you don't have the money to repair your house, you're not going to do much worrying about your lawn," Agnew said.

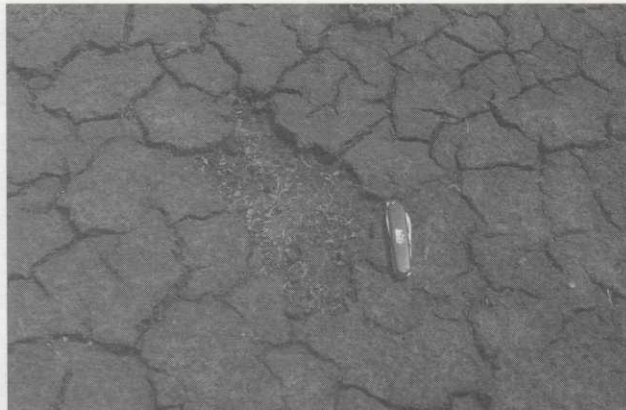
The scale of priorities, of course, is different for those establishments for which turf is a major element in their livelihood. The university's golf course was under water five times and an aerial photograph of a flooded John O'Donnell Stadium in Davenport, Ia.—home of the Quad City River Bandits, a minor league baseball team—was published in just about every newspaper in the country.

Even where such facilities are located on higher ground and thus escaped the surging rivers, they were adversely affected by the effects of the flooding. "Those who rely on municipal water were hurt. Des Moines water was

out for 19 days and, during that period, we had a 10-day dry period during which time they couldn't water," Agnew said.

Then, too, there are lingering economic effects to be factored in. "With the losses we've had, it's going to take some time for the economy to turn around. Emergency relief will help but that is going to be channeled where there is the greatest need. I don't expect a lot of emergency relief funds to end up helping the turf industry," he said.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that a summer of water is apt to be followed by a winter of snow in that part of the country. "We start with ground that is saturated. If you add two to three feet of snow on top of that, you have real potential for major spring floods when all of that melts at



Turf killed by the flooding is visible beneath a layer of dried silt. Periodic river flooding always has been a mixed blessing, bringing destruction and new nutrients. Now the situation is complicated by materials from hundreds of sewage treatment facilities, farms, manufacturing plants, and storage facilities.

Photo provided by Gary Peterson, Jasper County Extension Service

The repair of some flooded facilities may "only" involve cleaning up and replanting, but the grounds of other facilities will be rebuilt more extensively, such as this ballfield in Davenport, Iowa, which was underwater for three weeks.

Photo provided by Gary Peterson, Jasper County Extension Service



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one time," Agnew said.

Others in the area pointed out that if the fear of new flooding materializes, many of the levees that were broken last summer will not have been replaced to hold back the water. Considerably lower flows in the rivers have the potential of repeating this year's damage as soon as warm weather returns.

Rich Hoormann, agronomy specialist with the University of Missouri extension service, predicted that it will be late next summer before grass crops ruined or severely damaged this year will be replaced. "Optimistically, we could have some back by May or June [1994], but it's doubtful," he said.

"I don't think turf is the primary concern right now. A lot of things are far more important," said Tom Voigt, extension turf and grass specialist with the University of Illinois. "You'll get some calls about re-establishment [of lawns] this fall, but I think most people will put off thinking about it until next spring."

He and others said there has been no effort so far to assess the extent of turf damage either in terms of acreage or money lost. Also undetermined is the long-range effect of the floods on soil.

"We don't really know what the river[s] deposited. I

### Flooding shows another benefit of buffalo grass

IRONICALLY, the variety being developed on an experimental and pilot-project basis as a counter to extensive drought proved itself capable of weathering the opposite extreme.

Ed Keeven, who had a stand of about 20 acres at his Emerald View Turf Farm in O'Fallon, Mo., said the grass hunkered down and survived under water for five weeks.

"What makes it drought-resistant is its ability to shut its tops down and almost hibernate. It turns out it does the same thing under water," he said.

"It came back right away — and looked even better."

The bluish green, fine-leaved grass is the only variety of native American grass used as home grass. It is a descendent of the legendary prairie grass whose interwoven web of roots provided a formidable challenge for pioneer sodbusters when the Great Plains were opened for farming more than a century ago.

While impressed by the present variety, Keeven said research now under way points to even better strains in the near future. "What we have now is great; what's upcoming is going to be even better," he said.

Keeven planted buffalo grass in August, 1992, in a joint venture with golfer Ben Crenshaw and Texas grower David Doguet. "We put in 20 acres. I now wish it had been 200," he said. ■



Both the trees and the turf were killed on either side of this road in Davenport. Plants growing on the higher areas in the foreground and the background, which weren't covered by the flood waters, survived.

Photo provided by Gary Peterson, Jasper County Extension Service

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could imagine that it might be a case of a mixed blessing to some extent, he said.

He explained that not all the silt spread over the area is a negative. Subdivisions which generally had lawns in a few inches of topsoil over a clay base could find an improvement in terms of possibly richer soil to a greater depth. Although reluctant to speculate on what actually has happened, he said the situation, in some places, could be analogous to the legendary creation of rich farmland in the Mississippi Delta as a result of the depositing of river borne silt.

If there appears to be some justification for predicting a coming bonanza for the commercial turf industry, it is tempered by the fact that those based in the affected area shared the fates of other businesses and farms there.

All three Emerald View Turf Farms operated by his family were virtually wiped out, said Ed Keeven. "We have one farm [at Columbia, Ill.] on the Mississippi, one [at Jefferson City, Mo.] on the Missouri and one [at O'Fallon, Mo.] where the Mississippi and Missouri come together, so we literally got it from all sides," he said.

Except for about 200 acres planted in buffalo grass (see accompanying story), virtually all of the combined 1,200 acres the family plants were ruined. "We have to start from scratch," said Keeven, estimating that, barring a recurrence, it will be at least two and a half years before things are back to normal.

"My father [now retired from the business] was in a flood in '73. He told me we're going to feel this one for another four years," Keeven said.

"It took everything we've got. It'll be two years before we have any production," said Linda Schroeder, who assists her husband in operating Roger Schroeder Sod Farm.

The family, she said, is weighing a decision whether to replant grass or convert to soybean production. "Either way it's a gamble. We can't make a much [profit] per acre with soybeans but we can come back much quicker," she explained. "It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul when Peter doesn't have much either," she added.

The floods — which she called the worst in the three generations the family has been farming — did extensive damage to this year's sod crop but it wasn't a complete loss. The farm in St. Louis County, Mo., was covered with water for a relatively short time but the one in St. Charles County, Mo., was under several days.

There is something of a bright note in the disaster, she added, because it brought out a cooperative spirit among growers. Barely had the water began to recede than competing companies were offering to supply each other to help meet demand from major customers.

"Instead of competition, we now have more of a helpful market," Schroeder said. "No matter how competitive we are [in normal times], when somebody is hurting, all that stuff is forgotten."

Lance Frye, president of Seven Cities Sod Development, the largest sod producer in Iowa, reported his business through August was off about 65% from last year. Unlike farmers whose land was flooded, he was hurt by falloff in demand, rather than on the supply side. In August the firm had about 500 harvestable acres, compared to about 200 that is normal at that time of year.

"I would expect there will be a lot of demand out there and we could go like gangbusters again, but we'll just have to wait and see," he said. Countering the notion of high demand for sod is the fact that total devastation is apt to result in many potential customers re-seeding "or just walking away from their [destroyed] property altogether."

Either way, lack of business this year is going to keep prices stable next year, Frye said. "With plenty of acres backed up, it will be hard to raise prices even if demand is up." ■