

Slumping Economy, Rising Costs Put Pinch on Nation's Sod Growers

Flat economic conditions and rising costs have put the pinch on almost everyone. And at the head of the list of determining factors contributing to the slump, at least for sod growers, is the nationwide decline in home building.

Leonard DeLalio, one of the largest sod growers on Long Island, New York, says it's been a downright bad year. He is part of a \$7-million-a-year industry there, and an estimated \$225-million industry nationally. For more than two decades it has been a booming business, largely because home building in the nation, stimulated by an expanding economy, was on the rise.

But the economy has stopped expanding.

"The virtually zero growth of home building on Long Island has led to at least a 12 percent decline in our revenues," said DeLalio. His farm on the island's North Shore, is one of three that take in a total 800 acres that DeLalio owns. His sod is a combination of the Merion and Fylking varieties as well as three other blends and two mixtures. His other two farms are in Eastport and Farmingdale.

But DeLalio had more problems this year than just the stagnant economy. "Sod requires as much tender-loving care as a marriage," he said. "You can imagine how much it hurt us, then, when we discovered *Fusarium* blight on our crop this year." DeLalio estimates the blight resulted in at least an additional 4 percent decline in his revenues this year.

Indeed, the combination of the blight and the national economic downswing worked so adversely for the sod industry in 1975 that several

sod farms in southern New Jersey, Washington State and Nebraska had shut down, according to American Sod Producer's Association statistics.

The *New York Times* reported that besides the blight, several areas in Nebraska and elsewhere in the country where sod is grown also suffered from a mixture of extreme rainfall and drought.

Bob O'Knefski, an agricultural extension agent with the Nassau Cooperative Extension Service in West Hempstead, New York, said that Long Island sod farms have been invaded this year by a variety of insects, most notably the "dung beetle."

"It was a disastrous year for sod," said O'Knefski. Most growers in the New York area had to turn to the experts at Cornell University.

Still, the mood among many sod growers continues to be one of concern.

"You see, it's not just all the natural causes that hit our business this year," says Dick McGovern, owner of the McGovern Sod Farms in Melville, Long Island. "The cost of our seeds, equipment and fertilizers has jumped between 100 and 150 percent. We have no choice but to absorb these things."

The McGovern enterprise, which comprises 600 acres of sod farms spread over four sites on Long Island — Melville, St. James, Mount Sinai, and Wading River — is considered the oldest sod business in the area. It was established 75 years ago.

Now McGovern, an energetic 38-year-old businessman who drives Continental Mark IV's and heli-

copters, supplies sod to the United Nations, West Point and Shea Stadium, as well as home owners.

Varieties of Bermuda Grass Tested for NPK Response

New varieties of bermuda grass are being tested for their responses to fertilizer.

Dr. Warren B. Anderson, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station soil chemist, is studying the responses of grasses which were recently developed by grass breeders and are not as yet on the open market. He is trying to determine both the production potential of the new varieties as well as the plant nutrient requirements for maximum forage production.

The research program has been underway for two years. The grass, which is planted in plots, requires a year to establish a good stand, says Anderson. During this time, the plots are tended and just enough fertilizer is added to ensure adequate coverage by the grass.

Three of the new varieties are under current testing. They are being compared with coastal bermuda, which is used as the standard reference for this research.

Fertilizer treatments are initiated in the spring. The treatments vary in the levels of the elements nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium used. Anderson says one or two of the new varieties tested so far may be superior to coastal bermuda, the standard reference.

Once a really outstanding variety is found, more detailed research into its nutrient requirements and production potentials may be undertaken.