

Average Seed Expenditures

Year	Amount
1980	\$6,318
1981	5,577
1982	4,394
1983	Insufficient responses

BOUNCING BACK

Sod industry fights back with customer education and higher quality turfgrass

1983 will be the year the sod market recovers, according to the results of an informal WEEDS TREES & TURF survey.

All respondents were owners, presidents or in top supervisory positions within the company. On the average, they managed 276.5 acres of sod. Sod production is the primary business of over 80 percent who replied. Others raised cattle, were in nursery sales or land development and maintenance.

Half of the respondents have reduced their sod acreage in the past two years to crops such as wheat, soybeans, corn, tomatoes, mint, vegetables, trees and tobacco.

Challenges ahead

Four challenges surfaced as major concerns for sod producers.

Growing higher quality sod at lower prices was mentioned frequently.

"For us, selecting the varieties and species that will satisfy the cities so sod can be used instead of rock or other ground covers is one of our concerns," said one sod grower from Colorado.

"This (alternate ground cover) is brought about by some water shortages in our area and from this, some cities like Aurora, CO, have enacted ordinances against bluegrass above certain quantities."

Keeping expenses under control was a concern for all, but depending on the

"The profit margin is very low compared to five or more years ago."

size of the company, seems to be handled in different ways.

"I have a second job during the winter months," explained one sod producer. "My wife also works. That's O.K. for a small producer like me to get by, but a large sod operation would have to diversify into other crops in order to survive. The solution to the whole problem lies in the ability to

lower interest rates and housing costs."

Another respondent said, "The uncertainty of demand brings about low production and low prices. The profit margin is very narrow compared to five or more years ago."

Education, not only of sod producers in state-of-the-industry developments, but of the public in the short and long-range benefits of sod over seed, was one of the largest areas of concern.

As one sod producer put it, "We need to have consumers recognize the value of quality sod over seed."

Another sod producer thought indiscriminate buyers were a problem. "We have to educate buyers to the importance of quality sod. Indiscriminate buyers that go for the lowest price sod regardless of quality, often hurt the image of all sod producers because the sod they lay often turns out poorly (weed-infested) and is often of mixed varieties. Low-quality producers are kept in business and prices in general are held down."

The threat of over-production was another challenge. While some areas are depressed, in others the demand for sod is there, but the money isn't.

"At present, we could sell more sod than we could grow," said one respondent. "We plan to continue planting as soon as we can afford to do so."

Elusive answers

The answers to these and other challenges aren't simple. According to the survey, there is a definite need for more aggressive advertising and marketing; more communication among industry members; lower interest rates; emphasis on good business practices and quality products; and more research at the university level for finding more disease-resistant strains.

Employment numbers of both full

Importance of Buyers in the Sod Market*

	Important	Moderately Important	Not Important	No response
Landscape Contractors	46	5	1	5
Homeowners	30	16	7	4
Cemeteries	6	17	20	14
Golf Courses	5	28	20	4
Garden Centers	13	20	14	10
Schools/Parks	15	19	11	12
Other	2			
*based on 57 responses				

Average Number of Employees

Year	Full-time	Part-time
1980	7.28	8.0
1981	7.54	8.0
1982	8.0	7.0
1983	6.08	6.0

and part-time employees have noticeably declined over the past four years. In 1980, the respondents employed 7.2 full-time employees on the average; in 1981, 7.5; in 1982, 8.0; and in 1983, 6.8. Part-time employees went from 8 in 1980, stayed the same in 1981, dropped to 7 in 1982 and dropped again this year to 6 on the average.

While the number of employees declined, few respondents have sold any of their sod acreage in the past two years and less than 30 percent have sold any equipment.

Some respondents maintain business is better than ever. Most, however, see 1983 as the year the sod business will pick up. Reduced interest rates were a prime factor listed in boosting sod sales.

Few respondents have sold any of their sod acreage in the past two years and less than 30 percent have sold any equipment.

In the chemical expenditure categories, 1982 was the year the most money was spent on fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides and insecticides. An average \$2,160 was spent, based on 36 responses. Insecticides came out on top with an average of \$2,240 being spent.

Equipment-buying has been held to a minimum over the past two years. Sixty-five percent of the respondents have postponed buying mowers, 46 percent have postponed buying sod harvesters, 40 percent forklifts, 44 percent trucks and 40 percent sprayers and spreaders.

Seed-buying has experienced a significant drop since 1980, although not

enough responded to accurately judge seed sales for 1983.

In 1980, on the average, \$6,318 was spent on seed. That dropped to \$5,577 in 1981 and \$4,394 in 1982. A little more than 50 percent of the respondents anticipated their seed purchases to increase in 1983, and again, a little more than half agreed the prices would pretty much stay the same. Fifty-four percent indicated they would be more inclined to try more expensive, improved seed varieties.

Landscape contractors are the most important category of buyers, followed by homeowners, schools and parks, garden centers, cemeteries and golf courses.

Challenges, solutions

Sod producers had other challenges facing them including lawn disease control, increasing productivity to keep prices down, oversupply in certain areas, government spending and sanctions, collecting on accounts receivable, selecting varieties and species of seed, finding workers, uncertainty of the market, slow down in building trade, not undercutting each other, being able to make a profit, cutting overhead and expenses, keeping ahead of hydraulic seeding, and, in general, being able to survive. Sod producers saw as solutions less acreage with higher quality seed varieties, sensible people elected to government posts, an improved economy, sod organizations to be better organized and to have those associations better police production, better water management, develop more disease-resistant seed varieties, have less government intervention in migrant labor problems and develop custom blends of sod that buyers can't get by using seed.

One individual, though, seemed to sum up a pervading feeling. The solution is simple enough—work like hell.

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A NEW BREED

Oregon Turf Farms
sees renovation market growing;
users finding sod
cheaper in the long run

By Maureen Hrehocik
Associate Editor



Sod is stacked on pallets as harvester keeps cutting.

"The concept of renewing a turf area is relatively new. Traditionally, people thought lawns would last a lifetime. That just isn't the case."

Will Lighty, manager of Oregon Turf Farms in Hubbard, OR, is building part of his company's future on that opinion.

"The people in the 25 to 30 age

range are a whole different breed," Lighty continued. "They're looking at new options and a new approach to everything, including sodding instead of seeding. Some people who are buying homes and who may have seeded once, are turning to sod for their second home or when they decide to renovate their lawn."

The concept of renovation is also helping Oregon Turf Farm sales.

"New home construction isn't the only source of buyers for us," said Lighty. "Renovation of old homes and property is a market we will continue to concentrate on. People are realizing the advantages of the adaptability and immediacy of sod."

Lighty has managed the 350-acre production area since the company's founding in 1976. Lighty holds a Master's Degree from Colorado State University in Ornamental Horticulture and Turf Management. Oregon Turf Farms is owned by Tom D'Armond.

On the average, Lighty spends \$6,000 to \$8,000 a year on seed and works with a staff of five.

"We use a ryegrass, bluegrass and fine fescue combination, but we're always looking for improved types," he said. "We're a very quality-conscious company."

Among his bluegrasses, he uses Shasta and Sydsport; Citation, Manhattan and Pennfine ryegrass; and Jamestown fine fescue. He is also "looking at hard fescues." Because of the lack of demand, he grows no bentgrass sod.

"Landscape contractors and retail garden centers are our main customers, however, we do get



Modern sod equipment (Princeton harvester shown) increases speed and reduces handling.



Will Lighty, right, in the field with Chuck DeJardin.

homeowners buying directly from us," he said. "We have felt some side-effects of the recession, but there is still a demand for sod."

In fact, Lighty has seen the demand for sod steadily increase over the past five years. Contractors are rethinking the cost of sod in light of the scope of an entire project.

"Immediacy is important in the case of resorts, hotels, and restaurants," explained Lighty. "Seeding requires six to eight months of maturing to achieve the same net result that sod gives as soon as its laid. Appearances are very important on jobs like these because appearances attract people to businesses."

Lighty also pointed to the fact that some maintenance contracts require as much as up to a year for seeded jobs, while for sod, it's usually a 60-day contract.

"This is especially important if a job is located far away from the home-base of the company," he said. "In this case, sod may be initially more, but it pays in the long run."

While the company hasn't reduced the amount of care it gives to its turf, it has reduced irrigation costs by getting the fields in good

condition and irrigating less.

Lighty uses a commercial nitrogen fertilizer, sometimes straight, other times blended with phosphate, potash and sulphur.

"We still use netting, but the material is more mature at harvest time," he said.

The company's greatest marketing tool is word of mouth. It tries to live up to its slogan, "We're easy to get a lawn with."

"The quality and reputation of our product is the key to our sales," Lighty said. "Success of our product is always a concern. We try to help our customers utilize the product in a way that will be successful."

The adaptability of Oregon Turf Farm's sod was proven in a shopping mall where sod was laid on asphalt and is doing beautifully.

"The future of the industry looks excellent," Lighty says. "Sod is a useful tool in the builder/developer's bag of useful tools. All people who are serious in using property as a money-maker, must seriously consider sod."

"It's really a matter of being an educational process," Lighty continued, "showing people options they may not have been aware of."

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JULY 1983/WEEDS TREES & TURF 39

KEY IS EFFICIENCY

Long Island sod producer uses pragmatism to adjust to current market trends

By Ann Reilly



Efficiency of McGovern's equipment is a principle concern.

You know it's spring on Long Island when the boom trucks carrying pallets of sod roll down the Long Island Expressway.

Chances are strong that McGovern Sod will be lettered onto many of those trucks, and that they will be headed to Shea Stadium, West Point, or a cemetery, park, landscape contractor or retail garden center somewhere in metropolitan New York City, New Jersey, Connecticut or Long Island.

McGovern has been selling sod since the turn of the century when James McGovern cut old pastures and golf courses for sale to the residents in Brooklyn. McGovern's first farm of 15 acres was purchased in 1936 and the operation has increased over the years to its present 600 acres in three locations (Melville, Calverton and Mt. Sinai) on Long Island.

Like many sod farmers, the McGovern's bought and sold land, moving outward to new locations as the population multiplied, and constantly tried

Ann Reilly is Executive Director of the New York State Turfgrass Association and the Mailorder Association of Nurserymen. She lives on Long Island.

to upgrade the operation. Expansion became possible through successful real estate transactions and the production of the highest possible quality sod due to Long Island's ideal soil structure and water percolation and good climatic conditions. Today McGovern Sod Farms owns 60% of its

land and leases the remaining 40%. Cousins and partners Richard T. and Edward C. McGovern operate McGovern Sod Farms today, a far cry from the business started by their grandfather over eight decades ago.

Dick McGovern considers the efficiency of his operation to be primary. His grandfather no doubt ever envisioned today's mechanization, irrigation equipment, regular programs of fungicide, insecticide and herbicide controls available, radio controlled operations between the field, the office and the trucks, and deliveries within 24 hours.

The trend in the sod growing industry in recent years has been to increase efficiency since it is an industry with high capital investments in mechanization. Since the early 70's, the development of modern harvesting equipment has lowered manual requirements from 15 men to five men to do the same job and has eliminated hand stacking. McGovern's crews harvest an average of 5,000 sq. ft. per hour per machine allowing for down time; the harvesting equipment can actually cut and stack 6- to 7-thousand sq. ft. an



Dick McGovern, left, and dispatcher Tom Hunt.

hour at peak efficiency. This figure converts to a trailerload an hour for every two harvesters.

The industry has itself to thank for its innovations, for it is the sod growers themselves that have invented and manufactured their new equipment. The 13-gang mowers that cut McGovern's fields are the largest available in the industry and used almost exclusively by sod growers. Big rolls, 48-inches wide and 50-feet long, have been developed for large scale sod laying operations.

Although improvements in technology have definitely increased the efficiency of the sod growing operation, McGovern doesn't foresee it reaching the point of computerization. "It's an eyeball business," he explains. Sod fields are visually studied every day, and something additional is usually found that needs to be done. Studies were done to set up irrigation parameters, for example, but it was found that there were too many soil differences, too much variance in temperature to make it work.

McGovern's crews harvest an average of 5,000 square feet per hour per machine, allowing for down time.

McGovern's sod fields are generally fertilized three times a year, with the type of fertilizer varying with the age of the turf. A 1-2-1 ratio, 50% organic fertilizer is used at seeding time and on young turf, with a switch to a 16-8-8 for mature stands. If visual inspection reveals that a fourth application is necessary, it is done.

Turf is mowed on a regular schedule but this again can vary with rainfall and heat. Cutting height is set at 1¼ inches in spring and raised to 1½ inches about the first of June. If it becomes very hot in summer, height can be increased to as much as two inches, but McGovern explains that this is not necessarily desirable since long grass invites fungus diseases. While mature sod is cut every three to four days, sod ready to be harvested is cut every day or two, again based on physical inspection. If it's too long, it doesn't stack properly.

New turfgrass varieties and hybrids have also been a boon to the sod grower, since they contribute attributes

such as disease resistance, faster establishment rate, seedling, vigor, darker color or earlier greening-up. Varieties grown at McGovern are primarily bluegrass and include Adelphi, A-34, Touchdown, Eclipse and Ram I, with the tendency being away from non-bluegrass shade mixtures in very recent years.

Like many other segments of the Green Industry, the sod farming operations on a national level, especially

the smaller farms, have been hurt by recent economic times and the decline in new construction. This downward trend has, however, started to turn around already, and McGovern expects it to be back on level course by late this year to next spring. With 70% of the members of the American Sod Producers Association farming on 200 acres or less, one would not be surprised that the industry felt the effects hard and saw some diversification to

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other crops in some areas. That, too, is changing back at present. Long Island's sod business remained in healthier shape than the rest of the country's during the recession, primarily because of its microcosm of better economic conditions.

Even the healthy Long Island industry has seen some decline, however. The number of sod growers has decreased dramatically in the last dozen years from eleven to four, but the acre-

age has remained approximately the same or down only slightly to its current 2500 acres.

Dick McGovern's philosophy in keeping his operation strong is one of realism, pragmatism and adjustment to the market. He takes advantage of new innovations to the ultimate, keeping his eyes open and asking questions at meetings and of salesmen. The most important thing to him is to make a profit first, balancing the economics

and technical aspects of producing a quality product. He has a belief in the future which he feels he couldn't operate without.

McGovern got his sod growing experience on the job, and he feels it came hard to him without a technical background. His degree is in economics from Fordham University. Working "hands on" in the business and visiting other growers brought the necessary experience. If he were to start over again today, McGovern feels a university degree in agronomy would be a necessity.

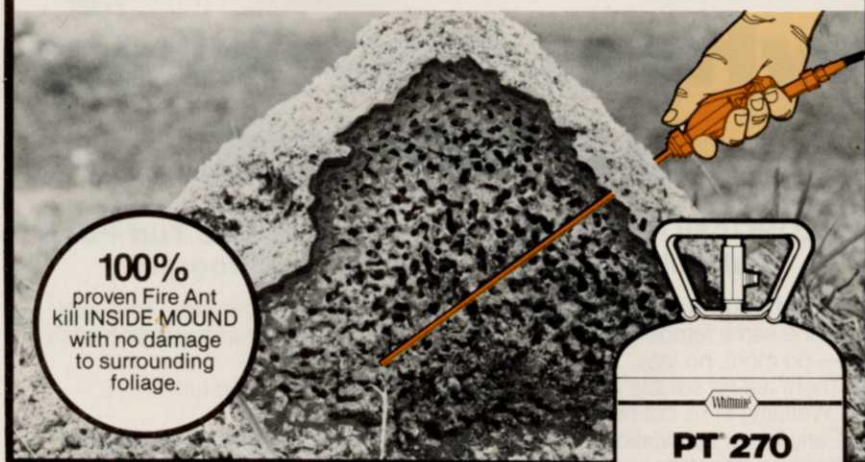
In the last several years, McGovern has taken his "hands on" experience in sod production and sales and shared it with others by becoming highly involved in the turfgrass industry. He is a member of the Board of Directors and Conference Chairman for the New York State Turfgrass Association, member of the Research Committee of the American Sod Producers Association, member of the Nassau County Turf Advisory Committee and Chairman of the Suffolk County Agricultural Advisory Board. McGovern sees the role of associations as being a forum for disseminating information, bringing technical and legal problems to the forefront and dealing with them in a concerted effort, funding research and unifying divergent interests.

In hours "off duty" from McGovern Sod Farms and industry-related activities, Dick McGovern enjoys the many faceted life of his wife, three children, tennis, golf, weightlifting, traveling, wood-working, collecting fine wines and investing in real estate and the stock market.

Robert Russell of J. and L. Adikes, a close friend and fellow member of the turfgrass industry, sums up what makes McGovern the successful man he is. He says, "Dick McGovern is a product of the old school. He knows how to work when the need is there. As a youngster, before the age of mechanization, he learned the hard way from tough masters, his father and his uncle. He learned what it was like to get up at 4 a.m. be at the field at daybreak, and cut, pile and load by hand trailer after trailer of 12-inch squares.

"He has been meticulous about changing with the times and keeping abreast of new technology and knowledge concerning the requirements of today, needed to produce a first class, merchandisable piece of sod. Dick makes a point of knowing what is going on in his industry."

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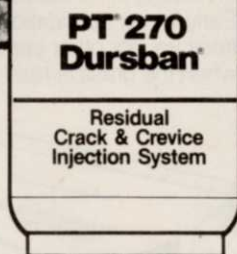
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