

Demand, average yields pinch turf seed supply

Hot, dry summer reduces Kentucky bluegrass crop; prices expected to rise.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

The 1985 outlook for turfseed: yields are down, demand is high, prices should increase.

Purchasers of grass seed may want to buy now rather than take their chances next spring. This is what the WEEDS TREES & TURF staff learned in a head-baking-hot summer trek to the Northwest where much of this nation's grass seed is produced.

Economics and weather dominate the turfseed industry. A string of warm, dry weekends in the Mid-East and East this spring soaked up carryover from the 1984 grass seed crop. Home and office construction, triggered by the most favorable loan interest rates in five years, goosed demand for grass seed.

Similar conditions in the spring of

1986 will pinch turfseed supplies. Sod growers, particularly, should be booked through June.

Blame nature

Heat (90 degrees plus) and drying winds in the Northwest withered the production of ryegrasses and fescues somewhat (and allowed for one of the earliest and quickest harvests in the



WT&T staff surveys turf-seed crop in Northwest. Jerry Pepin (red shirt) and Kent Wiley (white shirt), both of Pickseed West, Tangent, Ore., tour a field with WT&T Editor Jerry Roche (far right), Group Publisher Bob Earley (green shirt), and Bob Mierow (far left).



Mike Robinson of Seed Research, Albany, Ore., says turf-seed demand is high.

industry's history). But, it had a dramatic effect on Kentucky bluegrass yields in Oregon, the Palouse area south of Spokane, Wash., and Idaho.

"In spite of the hot, dry weather, we thought we were in pretty good shape with our proprietary varieties because of irrigation," says Doyle Jacklin of Jacklin Seed, one of the nation's largest suppliers of Kentucky bluegrass. "But the plants apparently just couldn't keep up. They just couldn't fill the seed heads."

Jacklin, supplied by the Washington and Idaho farms, estimates the 1985 harvest of improved Kentucky bluegrass varieties at 55 to 65 percent of normal. Non-irrigated common varieties suffered even more, producing as little as 20 percent of normal.

"There definitely could be some shortages in late spring, assuming the weather is good then," Jacklin says.

Prices of common Kentucky bluegrass "could hit some historic highs," says Jim Collins of Full Circle Inc., Madras, Ore. Across the state, Kentucky bluegrass acreage is about one-third of what it was just three years ago. On top of that, the heat and lack of rain dropped the harvest another 30 percent. Even with anticipated higher bluegrass prices, farmers "won't get carried away" in increasing acreage, Collins promises.

In part, this caution by farmers is keeping the supplies of turf-type tall fescues, the newest darlings of the turfgrass industry, below demand. The other limiting factor is supply of seed stock.

Popularity rising

"The turf-type tall fescues did very well this year," says Mike Robinson of Seed Research, Albany, Ore. "We're putting out as much as we can."

The popularity of these new varieties of tall fescues is snowballing in the so-called transition zone across the often-dry mid-belt of the U.S. New selections of even finer-bladed and greener varieties of the deep-rooting tall fescues are in the works. The real marketing fireworks are still ahead.

Bob Petersen of Burlingham & Son, Forest Grove, Ore., feels tall fescue's rising star follows a familiar pattern. Merion Kentucky bluegrass dominated that market for 16 years; then other improved varieties of Kentucky bluegrass came in a rush. The evolution of the perennial ryegrass market was similar with a trickle of improved varieties finally exploding in a wealth of new varieties in the 1970's. Petersen feels many seedmen "underestimated" the tall fescue market and it might be "a few years before production meets demand." But they're hustling.

Plant breeders are attempting to accelerate the development of improved varieties of turf-type tall fescue.

Says Dave Nelson of the tall fescues: "They're still on the first or second generation. I don't think we have the breakthrough varieties yet. But they're coming." Nelson is executive director of the Oregon Fine and Tall Fescue Commissions.

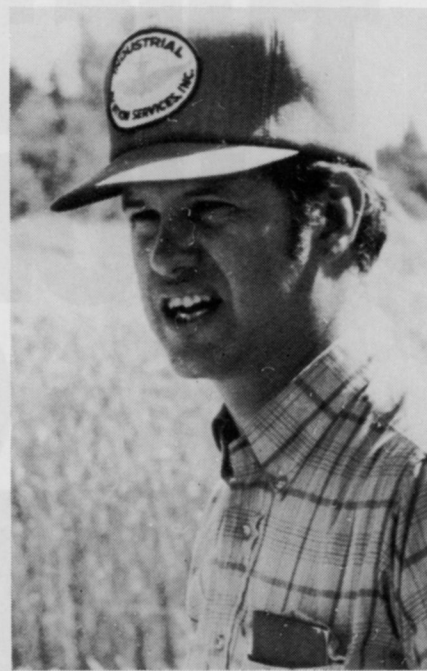
"We and others are working on new improved turf-type tall fescues to be released within the next few years," adds Larry Vetter of Northrup-King, Minneapolis, Minn. "Turf-type tall fescue usage will grow, particularly in the mid-South."

This growth could mushroom when breeders develop a tall fescue that's fine-leaved enough and green enough to complement Kentucky bluegrass in a mixture. More than one seed company is exploring this possibility.

Even with the excitement generated by tall fescues, demand for perennial ryegrass is pushing seed producers. This demand is stimulated by the success of the improved varieties in home lawns and in golf course overseeding. This summer's production, however, does not meet the bumper crop levels of 1984.

This year's "average yields" are disappointing only because "our expectations were a little bit too high," says Jay Glatt of Turf-Seed Inc., Hubbard, Ore.

Steve Tubbs of Turf Merchants, Albany, Ore., says perennial ryegrass



Charlie Mitchell of Turf-Seed explains stem rust resistance of perennial ryegrass.

"is receiving tremendous usage back East. Bluegrass is selling for \$1 a pound while perennial ryegrass is just 55 or 65 cents a pound."

The creeping bentgrass crop? "Average," reports Turf-Seed Inc.'s crack fieldman Charley Mitchell. "We're down a little bit from the potential because of the heat. It may not be an excellent year, but we're still encouraged."

Preliminary indications point to tight supplies of bentgrasses in 1985.

While breeding and research of hopeful individual varieties continue full throttle, grass seed users will be seeing more emphasis on blends of complementary varieties and mixtures of grass seed types soon. The reasoning is sound. It provides a better genetic diversity; the strength of one variety masks the weakness of another.

The idea of blending is not new with companies like International Seed with its PhD and Turf Seed with its CBS and CBS II blends of improved perennial ryegrass varieties already well established. But it's being expanded with the addition of the tall fescue blends.

"We're going with the concept of blends instead of individual varieties," says Seed Research's Robinson. His firm offers its Champion blend of improved perennial ryegrasses and will be coming out with Trophy, a blend of turf-type tall fescues. Turf Seed counters with its Triathalawn blend of tall fescues. **WT&T**