

Floods, herbicides conspire to threaten '96-97 seed supply

by TERRY McIVER / Managing Editor

Ten to 30 percent of the 1996-97 tall fescue and perennial ryegrass seed crop will be lost due to winter floods and residual herbicides which killed grass plants that sprouted during a fall warming spell. The shortage could frustrate what is expected to be high demand for turfgrass seed in the fall of 1996.

Unseasonably warm weather caused late-sprouting plants to be killed by herbicides that were intended to remove seed remnants from the 1995 harvest. Severe flooding in early February capped off an unfortunate turn of events in an industry that prefers its plagues one at a time. Older ryegrass fields—those planted to ryegrass for the past three or four years—took the most damage.

"Generally, the 'volunteer' seedlings—the worthless sprigs that sprout after the seed harvest—are all that need to be controlled

by field burning, or—since field burning has been limited—by herbicides," explains Dr. Jerry Pepin of Pickseed West. Under normal conditions, the herbicides will not kill the established plants.

"I'm sure everybody used the recommended rates, but the recommended rates are for a certain set of conditions. This year, the herbicides just

worked much more effectively."

Adds Dave Nelson of the Oregon Fine Fescue Commission: "[The shortage] could be 10 to 15 percent. We won't know until the harvest. It could well be 15 to 30 percent."

Mike Robinson of Seed Research of Oregon says he is seeing a three percent loss of crops to floods, but "there will be a reduction of at least 30 percent...on the perennial ryegrass fields...especially on the older fields" because of herbicide damage.

"Another concern," Robinson points out, "is that some of the fields continue to show increased damage—the chemical is still working."

According to Nelson, perennial ryegrass—and to a lesser extent, tall fescue—is sold out for the 1995-96 season. Additionally, says Nelson, some seed companies were unsuccessful in planting sufficient tall fescue and perennial ryegrass acreage in the fall, largely due to competition from high-priced wheat crops.

Tom Stanley, marketing manager for Turf Seed, says water overflowed the banks of the Willamette River by 20 feet or more.

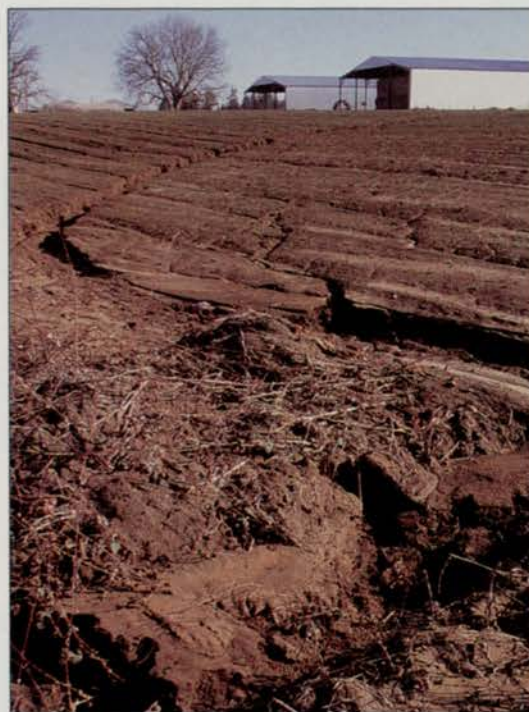
Higher prices

"Because the Oregon seed industry had massive carry-overs for the last three to four years, they cut back acreage to reduce inventory," says Stanley. "Turf-type tall fescue prices have gone wild, and there's not going to be enough to go around." He believes that prices for tall fescue and perennial ryegrass next year will be 25 and 15 percent higher, respectively.

"We're going to be short for another couple of years," says Nelson, who suggests that green industry seed buyers get their 1996-97 orders in as soon as possible. □



Pepin: Weather conditions a factor in control product efficacy.



Flooding through Oregon's Willamette Valley reduced portions of seed fields to bare ground.



Stanley: Seed prices are likely to rise.