

# AgriBioTech revamps management



## HENDERSON, NV —

AgriBioTech, Inc., (ABT), besieged by investor-initiated class action lawsuits, revamped its management team and announced that it will cut costs. It's also developing a plan to consolidate the many seed companies under its umbrella into a single entity.

Formed in 1987, ABT has acquired more than 30 seed operations since 1995 to become the world's largest forage and cool-season turfgrass seed company, with 1998 sales of about \$205 million.

But growth hasn't been as smooth as hoped, as indicated by the lawsuits, the first of which was filed in January. The suit and several similar actions allege that in 1997 and 1998, ABT overstated favorable financial results and strong revenue growth, which caused its stocks to trade at artificially inflated levels. ABT's stock (Nasdaq symbol: ABTX), which traded at \$29 a share in July 1998,

traded in the \$5 to \$6 range as LM went to press. ABT says there is no substance to the lawsuits and is vigorously defending itself.

Richard Budd, following ABT's Feb. 22 annual shareholders meeting, became Chairman and CEO of the company. Budd has been a member of ABT's board of directors since 1998 when his

company, Lofts Seed, was acquired by ABT. He is CEO of The Budd Group, Winston-Salem, NC. Also, board members took the unusual step of creating the office of president, and dividing it among four co-presidents.

In March, Budd announced: "Demand for our products and spring shipments appears to be very

good." He added that while ABT can't predict profitability for the remaining two quarters in the fiscal year, it feels it can break even on the pretax profit line for the remaining six-months of 1999.

Also, Budd said that ABT will attempt to cut expenses by \$14 million by the end of the fiscal year.

— Ron Hall

## Prepare for gray leaf spot scourge

**ANNAPOLIS, MD —** Turfgrass researchers and agronomists convened here in March to discuss strategies to avoid a repeat of widespread damage caused by gray leaf spot in 1998. The disease devastated perennial ryegrass and other turfgrasses across eastern and mid-Atlantic states. The severity of the attack caught turfgrass managers off guard in the transition zone.

While much of the symposium was directed at helping golf course superintendents cope with the disease, lawn care and grounds professionals are warned to be on the lookout for early signs of the disease.

### Out of control

"One of the frightening things about gray leaf spot is the speed with which it wipes out entire fairways," Dr. Mark Farman, University of Kentucky, said at the symposium.

"I wouldn't sleep well if I didn't have some fungicide down by late July," added Dr. Paul Vincelli, also of the University of Kentucky. He said the disease will become most prevalent across much of the mid-Atlantic states sometime after the first week of August.

Disease symptoms include wilting, minute gray and reddish-brown lesions on leaves and twisted leaf tips with a "fishhook, water-soaked" appearance.

Scouting and diagnosing gray leaf spot early is vital. The disease typically shows up first in "hot spots" or high traffic areas, roughs and in areas with southern exposure.

### What you can do

Fungicides such as Heritage work well, but turf managers can further lessen damage from gray leaf spot by:

- ▶ spoon-feeding nitrogen to perennial ryegrass late in the fall when the disease

doesn't have the upper hand. Be careful, however, because nitrogen can stimulate the disease when it has a good foothold.

- ▶ keeping perennial ryegrass as dry as possible because leaf wetness helps the disease thrive.

- ▶ mowing with a sharp blade and when turf is dry because scientists believe disease pathogens enter through damaged and cut leaf blade tips.

- ▶ removing clippings, which may reduce disease potential by as much as half.

- ▶ lowering cutting heights, which appears to reduce chances of disease.

- ▶ carefully timing overseeding of perennial ryegrass and ensuring seeds make soil contact.

For a more complete discussion of gray leaf spot and other significant turfgrass diseases, look for LM's Disease Control Guide in May.

— Mike Perrault