

BY RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

Boring? Are you kidding?

The Sonnen family — Rudy, his wife Paulette, and their sons, Cory and Ty — started Western Productions, a seed company, about six years ago. Rudy had already logged over 20 years in the turf and forage seed business.

The Sonnens work elbow-to-elbow in a small building just outside the small town of Woodburn, OR. There's nothing fancy about their offices. They roll up their sleeves when they walk through the front door.

The day I visited their operation, you didn't have to wipe the dirt from your shoes, the telephone jangled incessantly and everybody seemed to be moving in all different directions at once. And this was two or three weeks before the "busy" season, which usually kicks off with seed harvesting about July 4.

When somebody remarks that something is about as boring "as watching grass grow," they probably haven't spent much time in the Willamette Valley in western Oregon.

If they had, they would know that many people here — like the Sonnens — spend a lot of their time watching grass grow. And they can, in fact, get darn excited about it. Growing grass seed, both turf and forage, is the livelihood of several thousand people in this valley.

While grass seed is grown elsewhere in the United States and Canada, northern Europe and even New Zealand, the Willamette Valley is ground zero for most of the world's cool-season turf seed, including almost all of its perennial ryegrass seed.

For this reason, you should be aware of the valley, too, which gets its name from the Willamette River that meanders northward, mostly through farmland, before emptying into the mightier Columbia River

near Portland. The valley produces an amazing variety of crops, at least to a Midwesterner like myself — everything from berries to hops to hazelnuts.

But the production of grass seed — half a million acres worth — is, by far and away, King of the Crops here. It's Oregon's third most valuable agricultural product, surpassed in value only by nursery stock and cattle.

There are good reasons why this valley is such a prime location for growing grass seed, including climate. The valley is bounded on the west by the Coast Range and by the higher Cascade Mountains in the east. Winters and springs are generally cool, but rarely bitter cold, and moist. Summers are usually hot and dry.

But the biggest reason is the development over the last 50 years of an amazing infrastructure which this season will harvest, package, inspect, label and ship about 800 million pounds of grass and legume seeds. Much of this takes place in a period of about two months.

Growing grass for seed, even in good times when the economy is rolling and demand is high, is, like all agriculture, a tough business that takes tough, determined people like the Sonnens and the many others like them in the valley.

Can you envision the landscape industry without improved turfgrasses?

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