



Seed supply shortages likely

Lock in orders of your favorite grass seed varieties. The buyers' market may be about to end

BY SUSAN H. SAMUDIO, M.S.C.

Landscapers have had it good for the last several years in that grass seed has been abundant and prices moderate. But things are changing, and market analysts point to a coming turnaround in the grass seed industry. For the first time in five years, there will likely be an undersupplied market. Your favorite grass may become hard to find this summer.

Acreage slashed

Throughout the Pacific Northwest, grass farmers have suffered losses and oversup-



The author in a spring-plowed blue-grass field on the Rathdrum Prairie.

ply for the last three years. They've recently taken thousands of acres of grass seed out of production. Today's acreage for many companies is at levels not seen since the 1980s. The reasons behind the mass plow-out are varied. But for the end user, it spells spot shortages of popular varieties and the possibility of higher prices.

Many factors affect the seed supply: competition between grass and other crops for production, fall weather, field burning, bankruptcies and crop carryover, to name a few. Low seed prices and abundant supplies have left most grass seed growers and companies barely breaking even. To reduce the oversupply and make farming more profitable, production on almost every turf

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species has been cut as contracts run out on old acreage.

When grass prices are high, seed farmers often put as many acres back into grass as they take out. However, with the way prices have been the last few years, other crops like wheat, oats or clover appear more lucrative. Therefore, seed farmers are increasing their acreage of these crops and plowing their grass seed fields.

Balancing the ryegrass crop

Perennial ryegrass has had one of the biggest plow-outs. Oregon's perennial ryegrass acreage in the certification program dropped over 13,000 acres from 76,435 acres between 2001 and 2002 (below). Older fields have continued to be removed since last summer's harvest. Steve Rusconi, Simplot Grower Services Representative, says, "At a minimum, I expect a 15% reduction in perennial ryegrass supplies for 2003." Expect to pay more for perennial ryegrass this year — prices have already begun to go up this spring.

Leah Brilman, Director of Research at Seed Research of Oregon, also predicts a short ryegrass crop, adding that the perennial ryegrass carryover was gone by early spring.

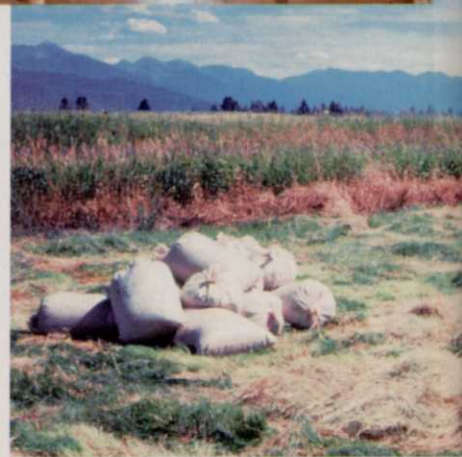


Bagged seed in Jacklin Seed's Post Falls, ID warehouse.

Similar reductions occurred with the fine fescues, which dropped 7,000 acres from 23,765 acres from 2001 to 2002. Nevertheless, seed supplies are expected to remain about the same as last year for the fine fescues, and prices should remain stable. Production of the bentgrasses has also remained about the same.

Tall fescue production in Oregon increased by 7,600 acres to 115,401 acres between 2001 and 2002. The new National Turfgrass Evaluation Program tall fescue trial planted in 2001 was the main reason for this increase. Since the 2002 harvest, however, tall fescues have joined the plow-out frenzy.

"I have heard several estimates that indicate over 50,000 acres of grass seed production has been planted to soft white wheat," says Gale Gingrich of the Marion County OSU Extension Service in *Seed Today* magazine.



Expect an adequate seed supply even with the plow-outs, since there was a large carryover of this crop from 2002. Prices are expected to rise this fall, however. Older varieties should be readily available, but new varieties will probably be in short supply.

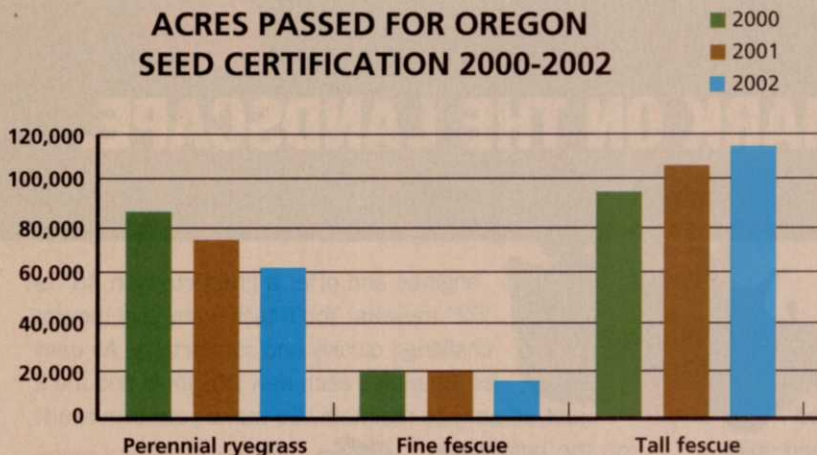
Ky bluegrass sings the blues

Big problems loom in the future for Kentucky bluegrass production. Field burning, which has been used for decades to stimulate Kentucky bluegrass seed production, is on the way out in Idaho. A total burning ban may go into effect within 18 months.

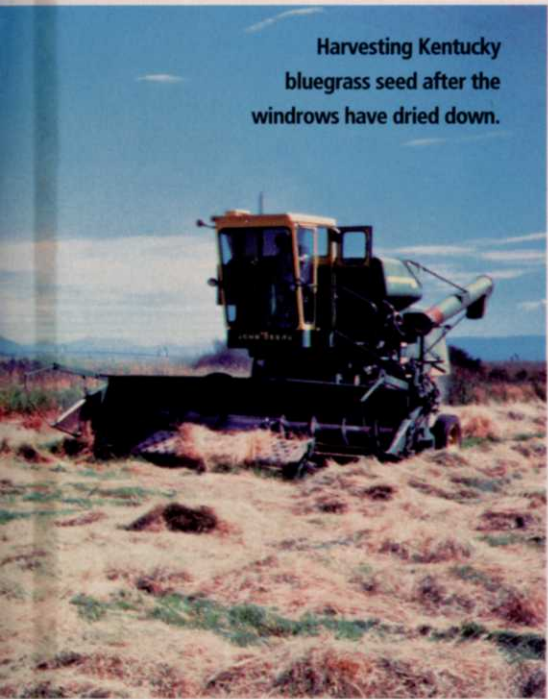
A coalition of several groups that includes environmentalists, health officials, tourism interests and concerned citizens have lobbied against grass field burning for several years. They may be able to get bills in the Idaho legislature passed this year.

Burning was banned in Oregon and Washington before 2000, but a ban on burning in Idaho poses a bigger threat to having bluegrass production in Idaho due to the climate and inability to do annual cropping.

ACRES PASSED FOR OREGON SEED CERTIFICATION 2000-2002



Harvesting Kentucky bluegrass seed after the windrows have dried down.



Without this tool, most Kentucky bluegrass cultivars have greatly reduced yields. The loss of field burning and moving production to higher-priced irrigated land is making Kentucky bluegrass production costs increase. As with the other species, farmers are switching to other crops as contracts run out.

"Bluegrass acreage is way down in the Basin this year," says Dave Johnson, Simplot Grower Representative in the Columbia Basin of Washington. "There's probably only half as much acreage as two years ago." He expects average yields on the 2003 crop but notes increased weeds.

Last fall was very dry throughout most of the Northwest. The National Climatic Data Center determined the three-state region of Oregon, Washington and Idaho had below normal precipitation in nine of the 12 months in 2002, and that a short-term drought lasted from May to December. This affected the after-harvest greenup on grass fields and the effectiveness of some of the fall herbicides used to clean the fields.

PLS means value in seed buys

To be a savvy consumer, compare the cost of pure-live seed (PLS) per pound between lots. Purchases based on PLS ensure that you obtain the most viable seed for your money.

As an example, let's say Lot A has 98% purity, 85% germination from a seed test, and sells at \$0.60 per pound. Lot B has 85% purity, 80% germination, and sells at \$0.55 per pound. Which is the best buy? To calculate the cost per pure live seed, you would use purity multiplied by the germination and then divide by the cost per pound. Using this formula, Lot A actually costs \$0.72 per pound of PLS and Lot B costs \$0.80 per pound. Lot A with the higher price and quality is the better buy.

"Many plow-outs have been on the non-burned areas, including many that had poor fall greenup because of poor moisture," says Steve Bateman, Simplot Grower Representative on the Camas Prairie in Idaho. "The farmers are just taking them out since the seed yields won't be there. Bluegrass production in the state of Idaho is down about 20,000 acres."

Predictions from Kentucky bluegrass production areas all point to a reduced supply of both common bluegrass and proprietary varieties, which will make it harder to obtain good quality seed lots. Prices are expected to go up as this becomes more evident.

The dry fall in 2002 also created problems in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Rusconi says that about half of the new perennial ryegrass plantings and some of the three-year-old fields look weak. Growers are doing their best to push the plants by adding fertilizer. Many will also use growth regulators this spring to enhance seed yields. Brilman adds that the dry fall may affect the tall fescues more than the perennial ryegrasses since they aren't as resilient. She expects the tall fescues to have smaller heads and more light seed than usual.

Know what you're buying

Those of you who have only been buying seed for the last five to six years are used to a "long" market with plenty of seed, where only the best lots sell. This year there's less seed to go around, and consumers will pay a premium for seed lots with "zero other crop and weeds."

Seed labels include information on the seed purity, inert (plant chaff, etc.) and the percent of weed seed and other crop seed by species found in the bag. Lots that contain some weed or other crop seed are going to be more prevalent this year, especially with the dry fall reducing the effectiveness of pre-emergence herbicides. Before you buy, know which weeds will be a problem in your area and choose accordingly.

Expect spot shortages of some favorite varieties in both the perennial ryegrasses and Kentucky bluegrasses. Adjust your seed purchase plans, especially on newer varieties. Contact your supplier early for bookings, or have alternative varieties in mind when you're ready to purchase seed.

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