

# THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE

## THE END OF AN ERA IN TURF RESEARCH



**A** 70-year relationship between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and the turf industry has apparently ended. This partnership, which helped launch the golf industry in this country, has fizzled out without a protest. It died on a committee table this past winter in Beltsville, MD, after Jack Murray, the last full-time ARS turf researcher, retired due to poor health.

Since Drs. Piper and Oakley published the first extensive book on golf course maintenance in 1917 as employees of the USDA-ARS, the Federal government has served as a catalyst for the

turf industry. The contributions of Piper, Oakley, Dr. Fred Grau, Dr. Felix Juska and Murray -- all ARS researchers -- have served as a beacon of light for other private and public turf researchers across the country. They have provided facts where needed as a counterbalance to commercial interests and encouraged states to fund important regional turf research. They helped the U.S. compete against other countries which support turf research with government funds.

Their success in helping build the turf industry to an annual revenue of nearly \$30 billion has no doubt paid dividends for the government in the form of taxes on turf-related products and income. Now the ARS committee says it can't adequately fund a national turf research program, and the states and regional ARS offices will have to pick up the slack.

Just three years ago, the ARS agreed once again to lend a fatherly hand to the National Sports Turf Council by providing office space and turf plots at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. Now it is slowly pulling the plug on the turf breeding, disease and insect control work being done there.

Ongoing projects coordinated by Murray from Beltsville, such as the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP), will have to continue independently of Federal assistance. The NTEP, a self-supporting comparison of turfgrass cultivar performance at research stations across the country, will be tabulated into a national report with the help of Maryland Turfgrass Council's Kevin Morris. Murray will contribute to the report on his own.

Murray's list of questions is long. He asks, "Where will we turn for a national perspective on issues such as, water conservation, the fate of pesticides used in turf maintenance, breeding new turfgrasses with improved insect and disease resistance, and providing safe turf for athletes? Can the individual states and turfgrass associations handle these requests for information quickly and accurately? What happens if we can't provide this information to government regulators?"

"The states are doing a good job in turf research," Murray stresses. However, will states follow the Federal government as they seek to streamline government programs? How can we protect state programs without a documented list of industry benefits? In many states, turf is a significant non-food crop representing thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in revenue. But who will document this?

It may be too late to save the ARS turf research position, sighs Murray. But he also says, "Enough political pressure can change things overnight!" The final decision rests with Dr. R. D. Plowman, Administrator, USDA-ARS, Room 302A, Administration Building, Washington, DC 20250, (202) 447-8732.

The seven acres of turfgrass research plots at Beltsville suffer from months of neglect. Fred Grau, who still lives nearby, remembers when the turf plots were moved from the Arlington (VA) Turf Gardens to Beltsville to make room for construction of the Pentagon during World War II. "We did it on a shoestring budget back then, but we made every penny count and fought for every research dollar we could get our hands on," Grau reflects. "It's sad to see that era end."

*Bruce F. Shank*

# EVENTS

CALENDAR

JUNE

**21** Midwest Sports Turf Institute, Harper College, Palatine, IL. Contact: Sports Turf Managers Association, 400 N. Mountain Ave., Suite 301, Upland, CA 91786. (714) 981-9199.

JULY

**25** Midwest Regional Field Day, Purdue Agronomy Farm, West Lafayette, IN. Contact: Barb Meyer, Purdue University, Dept. of Agronomy, Lilly Hall, West Lafayette, IN 47907-7899, (317) 494-7899.

AUGUST

**7-8** Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association Summer Meeting, Stone Mountain Memorial Golf Course and Conference Center, Stone Mountain, GA. Contact: George Kozelnicky, GGCS, P.O. Box 6377, Athens, GA 30604-6377, (404) 543-7720.

**13-16** Park Planning and Maintenance School, Colorado Springs, CO. Contact: National Recreation and Park Association, Western Regional Office, P.O. Box 6900, Colorado Springs, CO 80934, (719) 632-7031.

**17-18** Park and Recreation Safety School, Colorado Springs, CO. Contact: National Recreation and Park Association, Western Regional Office, P.O. Box 6900, Colorado Springs, CO 80934, (719) 632-7031.

**30** University of Rhode Island Turfgrass Field Day, Turfgrass Research Farm, Plains Rd., Kingston, RI. Contact: Dr. C.R. Skogley, Plant Sciences Dept., Woodward Hall, Kingston, RI 02881.