

Global economy

By Murray Wingate

Leaders in the grass seed industry gathered earlier this fall for two of their industry's most important events. At both the Atlantic Seed Association conference in Philadelphia and later at the Western Seed Association meeting in Kansas City, attendees were reminded that we live in an interconnected world where a hiccup in one part of the globe is acknowledged in another and felt in the pocketbooks at athletic complexes, golf courses and landscape companies throughout the US.

To understand the current state of the grass seed market, you must first recognize that the grasses that cover our sports fields and parks grow on some of the same acres where wheat, corn and barley are also cultivated. That puts them in direct competition with the grains that ends up in the food we eat, that cattle graze on and the biofuels being produced to counter rising fossil fuel prices.

With that in mind, let's go back a couple of years to a time when grain prices were on the rise and seed companies were forced to increase payments to growers if they wanted their crops planted. Soon after the economy slipped into the ditch, new housing construction slowed to a crawl and weather conditions improved, meaning little or no turf was lost. It was a perfect storm that lowered demand dramatically for perennial ryegrass, tall fescue and bluegrass seed. Sports fields, golf courses and homeowners that normally would have overseeded decided they didn't have to, even if they could have afforded to.

Fast forward to today. Seed production acres are at their lowest levels in years. Corn and wheat prices continue to rise. Farmers are increasing production of grains they can sell for a profit.

Couple all that with our recent summer of discontent, when heat and drought parched turf across the country. The record-setting conditions left turf so ravaged in many areas that *not* overseeding wasn't an option this fall. Sports field managers, superintendents and homeowners were forced to buy and plant seed, whether they wanted to or not.

What does all this mean for the price you'll have to pay for grass seed next year?

With current prices at or near historic lows, we see increased demand for agricultural grains and continued demand for overseeding in the spring. And if the demand we've seen this fall continues, we could see a turnaround in market prices. But, like the weather, the seed market is tricky to predict.

If there's a lesson in this scenario, especially as the budgeting season hits, it's that manufacturers and distributors need to work with their customers to help plan their spring and fall seed purchases. Waiting until they need seed to put in the ground, as many did this year, may not be a sound strategy for 2011. ■

Murray Wingate is turfgrass sales and marketing manager for LebanonTurf.

Rhizomatous Tall Fescue and is the only one in the market. We just released a new variety called BAR FA 7676; this is the newest variety with the rhizomatous technology. We are not releasing these varieties very often as the breeding technology is very difficult, and it takes sometimes 10 years to develop a variety. Turf Saver RTF is one of the most drought tolerant cool season varieties. New Mexico State University did a large research study on drought tolerance under 15 and 30 % less water than evapotranspiration. In both cases Turf Saver RTF was the best in the trial. Better than other regular tall fescues, hybrid Texas bluegrasses etc.

Turf Blue. We are having a lot of success with fast germinating Kentucky bluegrasses. They give the sports turf manager a chance to get bluegrass established in a short time window. Pam Sherratt at Ohio State did a study on the establishment of our Kentucky Bluegrasses in Columbus. She reported that she could get Kentucky bluegrass established and ready to play in 6 weeks. Troy Smith at the Denver Broncos is using Barimpala, one of our fast establishing varieties already for years and loves it.-Christiaan Arends

SOD SOLUTIONS

Started in the early 1990's, Sod Solutions is a turfgrass research, development, and marketing company that has developed grasses that are drought tolerant, require less mowing, require less overall inputs, and are more durable for sports.

Sod Solutions works with more than 200 farms worldwide to produce and distribute turfgrass. The company is not locked into just one source of improved turf material but works with several entities to find the best grasses from around the world. Sod Solutions does not grow or produce grass for commercial sale but does work with private breeders, develops grasses in-house, and works with several university research programs to identify and develop the best varieties available for the industry.

A number of grasses released by Sod Solutions have had a significant impact on the sports turf industry including Celebration bermudagrass and EMPIRE Turf zoysiagrass. Celebration has expanded the capabilities of bermudagrasses with regard to wear, durabili-

ty, recovery, drought, shade, and overall performance.

Bella Bluegrass is the first and only dwarf variety of bluegrass that is propagated vegetatively. It grows and spreads from rhizomes, which allows for quick repair from damage. Bella has a dark, alpine-green color and is drought and heat tolerant. Bella only grows to about 4 inches in height which means less mowing.

EMPIRE Turf is a wide-bladed zoysia that has an emerald-green color and is extremely tough. EMPIRE is a top choice for parks as it is wear resistant and low maintenance. This year growers in Florida were caught off guard as the demand was very high throughout the spring, and even in a down economy, many regions ran out of EMPIRE for varying periods. It is uniquely adapted to the heat and humidity of the southern US and performs well on a wide variety of soils, which is not typical of most zoysiagrasses.

For 2011 Sod Solutions will release a fine-bladed grass called Geo Zoysia that is an emerald-green, fine-textured zoysiagrass with outstanding shade tolerance and adaptability to a wide range of climates and soils. In golf, Geo will be an excellent choice for tee boxes, surrounds, and fairways; Geo was developed by a turf producer and has proven to be an extremely tough grass.

Availability of Celebration and EMPIRE will be moderate to good for next spring. Growers are increasing acreage to keep up with demand, and the outlook is good for production from spring to summer 2011. Bella Bluegrass will be available next spring in the Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho with limited quantities elsewhere. Acreage of Geo Zoysia and Regenerating Perennial Ryegrass will be available in limited quantities across the country next spring.

Pricing for all grasses will be stable to increasing. Supply is getting more in-line with demand and prices should be increasing throughout next spring followed by normal summer stabilization. Turf is like anything else, you generally get what you pay for. Be prepared to pay a fair price for high quality turf or be prepared to suffer consequences that will most likely cost more in the long run if you purchase on price alone.-Tobey Wagner ■