

Turf Seed Market in Healthy State



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The economic recession of 2008-2009 is in the rearview mirror, but it is still impacting the turf seed industry as the economy continues to recover. The overall assessment from Glenn Jacklin, production manager of [Simplot – Jacklin Seed](#), is that while things aren't booming, all aspects are healthy.

"For the most part, most of the companies are healthy, most growers are healthy, and we don't seem to have an oversupply of any one species," says Jacklin. "There are certain species that may have a little bit more carry than we would like going into a new crop, but we're not really overdone on anything."

Jacklin believes the turf seed industry is still in recovery mode after the collapse of the economy and housing industry in 2008-2009. Housing starts fell from 1.8 million annually to 300,000 to 400,000 annually. When houses are built, lawns are generally planted nine months later, so when housing starts begin to recover, the turf seed industry feels that recovery nine to 12 months later.

"Housing starts are up but are still not what they were pre-recession," Jacklin says. "But I don't know if we will ever get to that level again because that was chaotic building and loaning, etc."

But things are picking back up again, and recovery is starting to take place in the sectors that define the turf seed business.



Crop consistency

Simplot – Jacklin Seed is located in the Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Idaho and Washington) where most cool-season grass seed is cultivated. The harvest in this area so far, according to Jacklin, has been average to good.

"We don't have a bumper of really anything out there, including tall fescue and ryegrass species," Jacklin says. "Going into the crop, we felt comfortable but maybe a little overdone, so we had a little more carry than we would have liked, but it's manageable carry. The crop seems to be coming in average or a little below, so if we have a decent fall, we should be in pretty good shape with those two species."

The [Kentucky bluegrass](#) species was very short going into the new crop, due to the 2015 crop being way off as a result of heat and drought and an open winter. Turf seed companies went into 2016 with a fairly empty pipeline, so cleaners are moving fast now to get seed available for the fall market.

"But in general it looks like we have a fairly good or average crop of blue coming in, so once we get the cleaners going and get seed moving into the pipeline, the availability of blue should be adequate for demand," says Jacklin. "The same goes for bent. We're fairly good at supplying demand in that cool- season species as well."

Weather's impact on turf seed

Overall, Jacklin doesn't feel the trade is too overly concerned with any one species right now. The crop was affected slightly last fall because it was dry going into fall, but the winter and spring made up for it. But those areas of the country affected by drought will obviously need seed to replace damaged turf as they hopefully come out of the drought this fall and start replacing dead lawns.



"That's usually where we can look toward seeing better consumption when we see turf damage in different localities from drought, disease, bugs or stress from heat or humidity," says Jacklin.

For the last four to five years, the Pacific Northwest has been experiencing mild winters, but they haven't affected tall fescue and ryegrass species as much as bluegrass species.

"Certain species of grass need a cold winter or vernalization process, and bluegrass is one of them, especially the elite-type bluegrasses," Jacklin says. "If they don't get that cold period, they can go into a vegetative state. Last year's 2015 crop was the height of that, and we had a lot of fields that really never flourished, so yields were off 30 to 40 percent."

Jacklin and the rest of the industry is wondering if mild winters are the new norm or just an unusual cycle. Is this a product of global warming? Do seed companies need to start moving their elite bluegrasses to more northerly climates to get production? These are the questions seed companies are asking themselves after three to four straight years of subpar bluegrass yields in their primary production area of the Columbia basin of Washington.

The future of turf advancements

As far as technological advancements go, Jacklin believes the industry is standing still right now after giant leaps in improvement in traditional breeding as far as yield, color and disease resistance over the last 20 to 30 years. So, there has been a natural slowdown in advances over the last 10 to 15 years. That's in part to the industry having become commoditized, where any advancement or improvement on a species was small and there were a lot of varieties with small differences in the species but not big ones.

"The business was easy to get into, where there was no barrier to entry," says Jacklin. "You could walk into the Willamette Valley and license yourself for blue, rye and tall fescue and put a shingle on your door and go from there and get a marketing plan. If you go back to Marketing 101, a new product comes out and rolls five to 10 years unimpeded by competition but eventually people come out with the same thing and commoditization comes into that marketplace. That's where the seed industry is now."



Jacklin predicts any more huge advancements will probably come in traits, whether it's drought tolerance, growth or herbicide resistance.

"This has not hit the turfgrass seed industry yet, but GMO and trade introduction has obviously impacted wheat and corn and made huge advancements there in science and research," says Jacklin. "So it would seem that would eventually come to our industry. There are a few companies, including ourselves, who are looking in that direction, but nobody has really jumped into the GMO arena or trade introduction."

As far as how these advancements will help landscapers, it depends on what the advancement is. If it's drought tolerance or heat tolerance, then there will be less watering. Jacklin has eight varieties like that now, including a bluegrass that is low mow.

"If you get a trait like that in a variety of grass, obviously that will be desirable to the consumer," Jacklin says. This could also save landscapers time on customers' properties, enabling them to get to more properties in a day. And if you have to mow less, that will have a positive impact on the environment with less CO2 emissions."