

# Burn Ban Likely to Affect Cool-Season Seed Availability

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A recent decision by the 9th circuit U.S. Court of Appeals banning field burning in Idaho will affect grass seed pricing and availability around the world. The unexpected ruling was made in February 2007, which banned all field burning including Kentucky bluegrass seed production fields. Toni Hardesty, director of Idaho's Department of Environmental Quality states, "We're obviously disappointed in the decision, and we'll be reviewing it to determine what our course of action is."

On dry land grass seed farms like the one owned by Scott Mcleod in Nezperce, ID field burning was a necessity to produce high yielding common Kentucky bluegrass seed. Seed producers used fire to remove crop residue and shock the plants into seed production.

"Without this management technique it is not economically feasible to produce grass seed. Our budget depends on high yields. If we can't expect crops to produce, we will not grow them," explains Scott Mcleod.

Idaho growers were able to produce seed inexpensively compared to neighboring Washington state where burning has been outlawed for several years, and that low cost was passed along to consumers. Idaho growers traditionally produce 65 percent of common bluegrass seed in the United States. Other suitable seed production areas must irrigate to produce seed and that drives expenses up for everyone.

Common Kentucky bluegrass is genetically unimproved bluegrass. It is often sold in garden and discount stores blended with other more expensive varieties to lower cost to customers. Typically, average homeowners and hydro-seeders are the major consumers of common bluegrass. These people can expect common Kentucky bluegrass to be short this year and in the future. Any supplies will be

regarded as valuable property and will most likely fetch higher than normal prices. And because all seed pricing is indirectly linked, higher common pricing will undoubtedly lead to higher seed prices across the board this year.

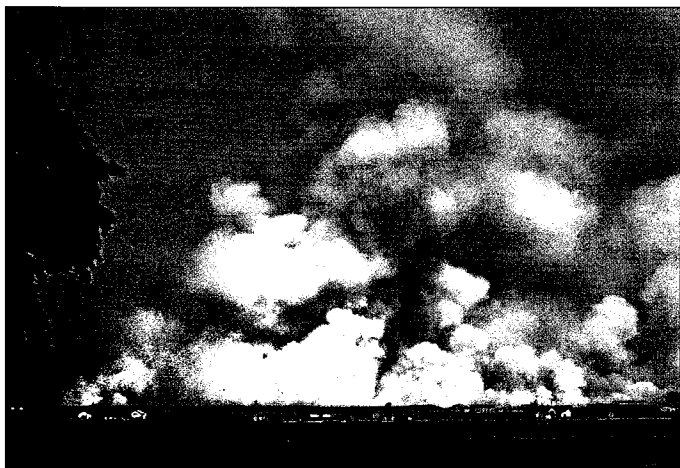
Price increases seem to be a standard throughout the agriculture industry. Previously low pricing and high energy costs were driving profitability out of farming. Now it looks like energy costs in turn might be the saving grace for producers. High fuel costs have made other energy sources profitable. Bio-diesel and ethanol plants have exploded across the nation and corn production has ballooned to service these new plants. True to form, high demand has driven corn prices above \$4 per bushel and most feel it will remain high through the end of 2007. Today corn is being planted in areas that before were predominately wheat, barley and grass seed production. As forecasters have taken notice of shrinking acres, grass seed and other crop prices are rising. So, don't be shocked to see price increases on your grass blend of choice.

With crop prices rising, grass seed companies fear production acres will be short. Greg Branson, a bluegrass seed producer in North Idaho explains, "It might seem short sighted to change crop rotation strategies, however, with wheat prices edging close to \$6 per bushel, our farm may have no choice but to dump our grass seed fields. We have to take advantage this year, to recover from the past five years of poor prices."

Proprietary Kentucky bluegrass (the genetically improved elite bluegrasses) are also losing ground to other crops. Jacklin Seed Washington State Production Manager Dave Johnson says "Proprietary bluegrass production is down 20 percent in Washington's Columbia Basin. Growers are placing a lower ranking on grass seed in terms of crops they want to grow." Grass crops are hard to establish and management can be expensive, he says. The Columbia Basin growing, which area includes Central Washington and Northern Oregon, is the heart of elite bluegrass production. Irrigated fields and a long growing season make it perfect for optimal grass yields. However this area also produces top corn and wheat yields and many growers have switched.

Johnson says, "The acres that remained in seed production in 2006 produced well and maintained excellent quality." But, if you are in the market

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this Spring or Summer for a premium blend of bluegrass it would be advisable to purchase your seed early before prices rise and good lots sell out.

As negative as the bluegrass seed picture seems, the tall and fine fescue market is far

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worse. There are almost no supplies of tall and fine fescue seed left from 2006's harvest. Weather drastically damaged crop yields. Oregon farmers produce the majority of fescue seed. Growers fought an uncommon drought in 2006 which prevented seed from filling the grass heads. Hard hit fields were not even harvested. Hay prices hit record levels and growers chose to make hay from their grass crop and not even harvest the seed. The fields that were harvested yielded lower than estimates. Yield predictions were off 10 to 15 percent. Buyers in the market for tall and fine fescue will be lucky to find any supply to purchase until the 2007 harvest is cleaned.

This same thing is happening to bentgrass seed availability. Over the last two years, both old and new improved varieties of bentgrass seed have sold out very quickly. The surging market has been driven by golf course renovation

projects and advances in bentgrass genetics. New research has provided a realistic way to transition *poa annua* golf greens into bentgrass, without killing the green and closing the course. The ability to switch to a superior grass without closing down a golf course for a season has grabbed the attention of superintendents around the world. New varieties of bentgrass like Alpha and T-1 need to be reserved for purchase months in advance.

The only good news on the cool-season seed horizon is that supplies of perennial ryegrass seed are good. Pricing was set high last Fall by the Perennial Ryegrass



Bargaining Association of Oregon, a grower's group that negotiates pricing with seed companies. This produced a sluggish market with reduced sales through the Winter. In addition, Oregon producers planted extra acres this Fall hoping to cash in. Despite the high supplies and additional acres, the ryegrass market has remained strong. Jacklin Seed market manager Rick Dunham says, "The higher bluegrass prices reach, the more ryegrass becomes a viable replacement." Additional ryegrass pounds will be added to cool-season blends and supplies will remain stable through the Summer and

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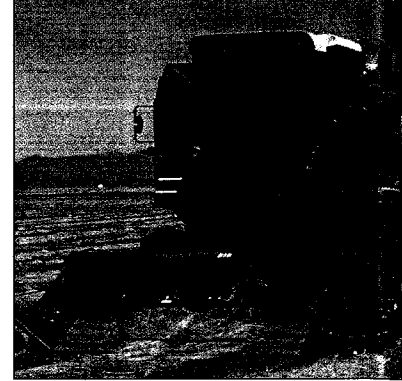
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then thin before the new crop is harvested and cleaned in the Fall. If you prefer a select variety, it may be prudent not to wait to purchase it. The latest and greatest rye varieties with disease resistance and darker color will sell out fast.

Many seed companies will remember 2007 as a missed opportunity. Most will be short on all species of grass seed and sales will be lost. However, consumers can act pro-actively. Buyers that reserve and purchase their seed early should obtain the varieties they want. Those who procrastinate



most likely will have to settle on substitute grasses or wait until new grass crops are available in the Fall. However with a rapidly changing agriculture market with burn bans and high wheat and corn pricing,



availability and price of grass seed in the Fall could become short, and expensive.

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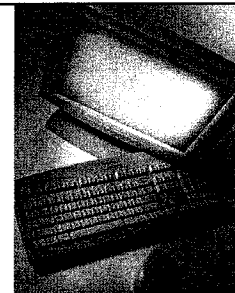
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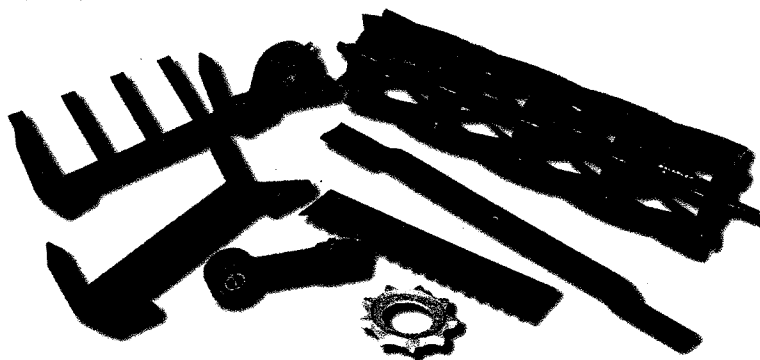


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