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## Oregon grass seed stays connected to fall sports

Posted By [admin](#) On September 10, 2009 @ 2:45 am In [Uncategorized](#) | [1 Comment](#)



[1] **Turfgrass holds many advantages over artificial turf**

By [2] [Oregon Department of Agriculture](#),

The college and high school football season is underway. This weekend, the NFL begins its regular season games. Prep soccer matches are now being played not to mention all the youth soccer and football teams that are practicing and playing. Underneath all the cleats, you are likely to find an Oregon agricultural product. Despite its many advantages, natural turf spawned by grass seed is facing competition from artificial turf but remains the choice of most teams and organizations.

"Athletic fields- which include everything from little league baseball to high school soccer to college football fields- have been an important consumer to the grass seed industry," says Rob Golembiewski, turfgrass specialist with Oregon State University's Department of Horticulture. "I believe it's important to continue marketing turfgrass for athletic field use. While the general public sees high profile college or pro fields on television, there are probably thousands more being maintained."

Oregon's \$510 million grass seed industry supplies seed for about two-thirds of the world's cool weather grasses. Some of those grasses are used for forage, but a majority is targeted at turf- the essential ingredient for football, soccer, baseball, golf, and just about any other kind of outdoor athletic activity you can think of. Oregon's turf seeds have been developed for more than a half a century to provide the durability and regenerative capacity that create an ideal playing surface.

"Cooperative work with professional sports teams has led to significant improvements in turfgrass breeding and product development," says Bill Dunn, executive vice-president, Seed Research of Oregon. "Pro teams prefer natural grass fields. This preference helps balance the move to artificial turf."

The National Football League has generally stated a preference for real grass. Of the 31 teams that begin play this weekend, only 12 have artificial playing fields in their home stadiums. Only four of the 30 Major League Baseball teams use something other than turfgrass. Currently, the new generation of artificial turf that uses crumb rubber in the base appears to be gaining popularity at the collegiate level, although most colleges and universities still play on real grass.

A vast majority of high schools in Oregon are playing football and soccer on natural grass, although the trend appears to be shifting for various reasons. Approximately 50 Oregon high schools now have artificial turf, but that leaves 245 schools that practice and play games exclusively on natural grass.

"The vast majority of outdoor activities are still played on natural grass," says Tom Welter, executive director of the Oregon School Activities Association. "Most of the athletes' time is spent practicing, and that's not on those artificial turf fields. Certainly the number of schools installing artificial surfaces has grown tremendously. But it's still the exception and not the rule."

Because of the expense of artificial turf, any schools contemplating the switch can only afford to replace the surface of the main stadium area and not any of the practice fields. Proponents say teams can play on the artificial turf repeatedly- several days a week- and the rain that falls later in the season will not lead to a torn up or muddy field in need of restoration. In fact, both OSU and the University of Oregon, each located in the heart of grass seed production, have artificial turf installed at Reser and Autzen stadiums respectively. The heavy use both receive during inclement weather has led to the choice of foregoing turfgrass playing surfaces.

But supporters of the real grass believe maintenance and long-term costs are reduced.

"If school districts look at the data that is available, they will find that when maintenance and construction costs are combined, natural grass fields generally average out to less cost per year than artificial fields," says OSU's Golembiewski. "In addition, with continuing efforts to go green and increase sustainability in our communities, a synthetic turf is a move in the wrong direction. While synthetic fields do not require fertilizer or pesticides, they are made of plastic and then filled with pulverized rubber particles. They are in need of disposal when the field reaches its life capacity of eight to ten years. And they need similar irrigation amounts as a natural grass field since both need water in the warmer months."

Environmental advantages of turfgrass include the absorption of carbon dioxide emissions and its corresponding release of oxygen into the atmosphere. Real grass also provides a filtering system for water and air pollution. The amount of heat radiated by artificial turf is in contrast to the cooler surface and air temperature above the canopy of turfgrass.

Polls have shown that most athletes prefer turfgrass and feel that it is easier on their bodies. Studies support the claim that real grass reduces the potential for injury and lessens the chance of infections. Grass fields "give" when the player turns or makes a cut, while artificial turf does not. A University of Iowa study showed that NFL teams had more major knee injuries on artificial turf when compared to natural grass. Turf burns and the malady known as turf-toe are unique to artificial surfaces.

A year ago, Oregon grass seed farmers essentially provided the natural playing surfaces for many of the sports venues at the Olympic Games in Beijing, China.

"In all likelihood, any kind of world class athletic event played or contested on grass is done thanks to Oregon grass seed," says Dalton Hobbs, assistant director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "We can point with pride to the Rose Bowl in football, World Cup soccer competition, golf championships like the U.S. Open and The Masters- these are events played on a turf product that has Oregon written all over it."

Research continues on developing turfgrass varieties that are more drought-tolerant, wear-tolerant, and recover more quickly from damage or heavy use. In the meantime, the current oversupply of some grass species makes every customer important to the industry, including those who are responsible for athletic fields.

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