

Prepare for takeoff

Low-growth turfgrass suits airports and other high-maintenance sites. BY CASEY PAYTON

A grass seed product that produces turf requiring little to no maintenance is probably not a good fit for a landscape maintenance company that makes its bread and butter from mowing. But for landscape or lawn care companies that service municipalities, airfields or other areas seeking to reduce mowing and deter wildlife, there's a product that's proving to be effective.

Brian O'Neil, owner of Weeds Inc., an industrial weed control company headquartered in Aston, Pa., with additional offices in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Illinois, has found the installation of FlightTurf to be excellent for embankments or hard-to-maintain areas, particularly around storm basins, within areas of parks or around ponds.

“Why not plant grass that doesn't require mowing and deters wildlife in the first place? We're looking at roadside use.”

—CHRISTINA KOBLAND

The product is a proprietary blend of fine fescues carefully selected for their tolerance to full sun and wildlife deterrence. O'Neil has installed the product for two state departments of transportation, one of which is testing it on a larger scale. He's also worked with builders on new construction and currently is doing a major installation for a solar panel facility since it's impossible to mow underneath the panels.

“This is a low-growing grass, so it eliminates a tremendous amount of mowing,” O'Neil says, adding it's easy to sell new FlightTurf installations because it's “just the cost of the product.”

It's a more complicated sale when it involves replacing existing turf.

“That being said, those that have a lot to gain from reduced mowing, such as airports, municipalities or the department of transportation, are willing to make the investment,” he says.

This turfgrass is also a good fit for airports because it's a natural deterrent to wildlife like deer and geese, which are an aircraft strike hazard.

FlightTurf was developed by Christina Kobland, co-owner of Native Return, a company with offices in Philadelphia and Santa Cruz, Calif., which specializes in returning ground cover to native plant species. FlightTurf, which originated in Oregon, has a method-based patent with several other patents pending.

Kobland says she got the idea for this turfgrass while working on a meadow assignment for the Philadelphia Division of Aviation. She saw how often the airfield had to be mowed—practically around the clock. That realization, coupled with a talk with the local game commissioner, got her wheels turning. The game commissioner explained how the airfield had to enlist sharpshooters to kill wildlife that wandered into the area. This solution didn't sit well with Kobland, a conservationist.

“Why not plant grass that doesn't require mowing and deters wildlife in the first place?” Kobland says. “That established the idea in my mind, and one thing led to another. The grass has already worked well in Philadelphia, and we've since been working with other airports as well as transportation authorities. We're currently looking at roadside use.”

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Christina Kobland

NEWS-FEED

ACQUISITIONS

SB Capital Partners acquired Aerations Only, now operating as The Lawn Guys in San Diego. Massey Services bought Baco Exterminating Services, located in Norcross, Ga.

VIOLATIONS RESOLVED

TruGreen and DuPont's legal battles regarding violations of the Telephone Consumer Protection Act and the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act, respectively, came to a close. TruGreen agreed to pay \$4.45 million for making unsolicited phone calls beginning in May 2009. DuPont was fined nearly \$2 million for failing to report adverse effects of its Imprelis herbicide.

CALIFORNIA APPROVAL

More herbicides were registered for use in California: Clipper Aquatic Herbicide, developed by Valent Professional Products/Nufarm Americas, and Tribute Total, manufactured by Bayer Crop-Science.



TURF+ORNAMENTAL CARE



GROW SLOW

Clients that have a lot to gain from reducing maintenance costs (such as airports) are ideal prospects for a new low-growing fine fescue blend.



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MAKING THE CONVERSION

Installation entails killing off the existing grass with a herbicide, mowing it down and then slit seeding the property with FlightTurf. It typically starts growing in within two to three weeks.

Native Return sells the turfseed blend to other companies, but it also offers installation, maintenance and consulting.

“Part of the reason behind the slow growth of this specialized grass has to do with our particular methodology of seeding and establishment,” Kobland says. Proper site preparation, installation and weed control in the first two to three years are key to a successful


installation. As such, Native Return walks contractors through the turf establishment and maintenance processes to promote success. The grass seed sells for \$5.50 per pound; contractors can buy directly from Native Return on its website.

The seed performs well in the upper two-thirds of the U.S. in the cool and transition growing zones, Kobland says. It’s not a good fit in the far South, but Native Return currently is developing a blend that works well where warm-season grasses thrive.

Some airports already are finding success. Officials at Erie International Airport in Pennsylvania installed about 95 acres of FlightTurf. Though it cost about \$90,000 more

than traditional turfgrass, the cost savings on mowing and maintenance alone can be more than \$800 per acre each year.

The opportunity could go beyond airports and municipal applications. For example, design/build and installation contractors may consider offering this type of turf for any client who requests a low-maintenance landscape and wants to eliminate regular mowing, Kobland says.

“Some only mow it once a year, but for a residential client who really wants to maintain that manicured look, it would probably be mowed three or four times a season,” Kobland says. 

Payton is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.