

Global Grass

One sod farm takes on the international marketplace

by Patrick White

Generally speaking, sod is sort of a local business. Grass that's grown in one location may make it across a state border or two, but in only rare cases—mainly for high-profile applications—is turf trucked any further than that.

For Jennings Turf Farms (www.sodfather.com), headquartered in Soperton, Ga., though, the job of growing grass is turning global. Sensing demand for high-quality turfgrass in countries around the world—where golf and other development is booming—owner Phillip Jennings had the vision a few years back to think big.

He started small, exporting here and there, but things began to really take off back in 2004 when Jennings hired John Holmes as “global sales manager” and gave him the specific mission of growing the company's export business. Since then, Jennings Turf has become perhaps the largest turfgrass exporter in the world. The success was made possible in part by the development of a dedicated export facility. “It's covered, weatherproof and lighted for 24-hour operation, if needed,” explains Holmes.

Sprigs are harvested in the field and then hauled to the export facility and placed into a washing machine. “Paspalums are all washed in one machine, and bermudagrasses are washed in another machine. That's to keep any contamination from occurring,” explains Holmes.

The washing is necessary to remove all soil from the sprigs. “Most countries require that any turfgrass shipped into their country be totally soil-free. That's primarily a disease consideration,” says Holmes. “Once the sprigs are washed, as they come out of the machine they go into a basket. Once a basket is full it is immediately placed into a refrigerated cooler that's kept at 38 degrees.”



Thanks to the systems the company has put in place, Jennings Turf can ensure that turfgrass shipped around the world is healthy and vigorous upon delivery.

The sprigs are allowed to drip-dry in this cool environment; once they reach a certain moisture level, they're taken out of the cooler and placed in a waxed, corrugated box lined with a plastic liner. “The sprigs are treated with a nematocide, fungicide or an insecticide, usually depending on what the country we're exporting to requires,” says Holmes. “Typically we treat all sprigs with a fungicide and a nematocide.”

After the sprigs have been treated, the bags are vacuum-sealed and returned to the cooler to await shipping. “Things usually turn around pretty quickly,” says Holmes. “Depending on the order size, we try to turn around most projects in two to three days. We have the capability of washing up to 10,000 bushels a day.”

Jennings Turf Farm works closely with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure that the necessary paperwork—including a phytosanitary certificate—can be issued in a timely manner, explains Holmes. “Our local plant protection agency will send an inspector out to watch our process of cleaning the soils off the grass and treating them with whatever treatments are necessary. Then they sign off and issue the phytosanitary certificate.”

This process must be followed for every order, and though it may sound involved, it's a critical part of exporting turfgrass. “Our U.S. regulators act on the behalf of the importing country to ensure that we're following they're requests,” says Holmes.

He must also be personally aware of the specific requirements of various countries to ensure a smooth process. For example, he says, “The Dominican Republic is a lot tougher to ship into than, say, the Bahamas. So when a customer calls from the Dominican Republic, you have to know what is going to be required up-front. It's the only way you can accurately price the job out.” Satisfying all requirements before the sprigs are harvested helps to avoid delays in transit and once the sprigs arrive in the importing country, allowing the turf to be quickly sent to its final destination and installed without delays that could harm the health and vigor of the plants.

Holmes says he recommends customers provide orders about one month before they want to take delivery of the turf, just to ensure that all the paperwork and shipping logistics can be worked out. “That's just to be sure there's enough time in case the import process in their country is particularly involved. For example, an import permit may require that the grass be free of brown patch, so we may be required to do some initial testing on the grass before we process it. This means that we have to have the plant protection people need to come and take a sample of the grass, send it to an independent laboratory and get the results back. The results would then be attached to the phytosanitary certificate.”

The actual shipping of the grass can be just as complicated as obtaining the necessary approvals and harvesting and washing. “Right now we're shipping to Tahiti, Fiji, some really exotic, faraway places,” says Holmes. “The logistics going there are a lot different than just shipping down to the Caribbean. When we ship down to the Caribbean, everything flows out of the Port of Miami—it's a fairly simple

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Sprigs are cleaned in a state-of-the-art washing machine.

Sprigs being prepared to be shipped at Jennings Turf's new indoor production facility that allows turf to be harvested, washed, boxed and refrigerated within a matter of hours.

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process where a refrigerated unit is sent up to the farm and we transfer the boxes of turf to the refer, which is then sealed. We try to keep everything at 38 degrees. The refer is placed on a boat at the Port of Miami and it sails to the port of call." Jennings Logistics, another company owned by Phillip Jennings, has a fleet of more than 70 refrigerated trucks, which allows Jennings Turf to essentially handle the trucking in-house and maintain greater quality control over the process.

If the destination requires that the turf be delivered on a plane, the process becomes a bit more involved. "If we're sending grass over to Asia or Europe or the South Pacific, we really have to be more on our toes. We typically fly out of Atlanta or JFK. The shipments are once again sent via refrigerated truck and have to arrive at the airports to go into a cold storage holding facility. About one hour before the plane takes off (sometimes on a commercial flight, other times a cargo plane) the turf is loaded on. Once the plane is up in the air, the temperatures in the belly of the plane are plenty cold enough so you don't need refrigeration."

Jennings Turf is able to track and monitor the temperature of the precious cargo throughout its travels,

thanks to the use of "tattletale thermometers." Holmes explains: "We place these thermometers in several of the packages and they record the temperature throughout the journey. So if something happens along the way, we can really pinpoint down to the hour when the temperature spiked and lay blame on the responsible party."

While the process generally goes smoothly, there's always a danger that something could go wrong between the time the turf leaves the control of Jennings Turf and the time it is delivered to the customer. "You almost have to self-insure against losses in this business," says Holmes. "We do buy insurance, but as with any insurance claim, the process can get drawn out. If something does happen, we need to be able to react and have the financial wherewithal to ship another load right away." That's one of the factors that international customers appreciate, and it's also one reason why Jennings Turf has few if any competitors among U.S. turfgrass exporters. (In addition, few other sod farms want to take on the tedious paperwork involved to make the whole process work.)

The cost to customers in faraway lands of importing sod from the U.S. is about four to five times higher than local sod might sell for—most of that going toward the cost of washing, shipping and handling the paperwork. "There's just a lot more that goes into it—I wish our profits were four or five times higher," laughs Holmes.

Why would a customer overseas be willing to spend that much more for grass originating in the U.S.? There are two reasons, and they both have to do with quality, says Holmes. "First, they can get a certified Georgia grass that a company in China or Fiji can't get down the street at their local grass grower. People realize that the two most visual things about a golf course are the design and the actual turf that's on it. So if they get grass that's contaminated, it ruins the whole package for them. Second, we are a licensed grower of several different varieties of grass, some from the University of Georgia and others from private entities. So we're allowed to in essence 'sub-license' these grasses to a golf course for one-time use farms. For example, we have several clients in the Dominican Republic who have purchased grass from us and planted their own mini turf farm on the job site in order to grass their golf course out of this mini turf farm." In many cases, the sites must pass inspection to ensure they meet the specifications to be able to grow a genetically pure grass.

Another thing customers like is the flexibility that Jennings Turf provides them. "There's really no minimum order," adds Holmes. "A lot of times we'll have customers who are just interested in redoing their greens. For example, Emirates Golf Club over in Dubai is renovating their Wadi course. We're shipping grass over as they need

it for their greens. When they get two or three green sites ready, they just call us up and we'll ship that amount over." What's remarkable is that, because Jennings Turf handles all of the logistics, the process for the customer isn't much different than ordering sod from the next town or county. "We've gotten the systems down so much that it is literally like picking up the phone and ordering sod here in the U.S."

Holmes estimates that about 80 percent of the export business done by Jennings Turf is for use on golf courses. Though, he adds, the markets served are pretty diverse. "We were just awarded two cricket facilities down in the Caribbean, one in Antigua and the other in Barbados. The World Cricket Cup is going to be in the Caribbean in 2007. As exciting as the Super Bowl was for us in the United States (Jennings Turf grew the sod used for the Super Bowl two years ago in Jacksonville, Fla.), that cricket tournament will draw more television viewers than the Super Bowl."

That's more people who will get to see the quality of the turf grown at Jennings Turf Farms in Georgia, meaning more potential customers for the company—no matter where they are in the world. 

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