Escaped bentgrass sounds a warning ....

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• GE Bent Grass [1]

Editorial: Escaped bentgrass sounds a warning Genetically modified for golf courses, it won't stay put.

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BEYOND THE BUFFERS

"It's a cautionary tale of what could happen with other [transgenic] plants that could be of greater concern. I suspect that more examples of this will show up."

Jay Reichman, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, who led the search for escaped bentgrass.

You don't have to be a grass-seed producer in central Oregon to be alarmed by last week's news that genetically modified bentgrass has escaped its test area and taken root among wild plants miles away. Once again, companies controlling the transgenic revolution have proved themselves unable to safely sequester their creations while the risks are under study. Those risks remain murky, though certainly real, and even if this first documented escape of engineered plants from a U.S. test plot falls short of catastrophe, rest assured there will be others. Industry practices and lagging government oversight virtually guarantee it.

In some ways, the downwind migration of creeping bentgrass into an area including the Crooked River National Grassland, northeast of Eugene, is more alarming than the earlier case of transgenic canola popping up in Canada. The issue is the same: accidental transfer, especially to wild and weedy plants, of a gene specially inserted to make the engineered variety resistant to the herbicide glyphosate (Roundup). But unlike canola, which has few wild cousins to pollinate and must be replanted each year, bentgrass is a perennial with at least a dozen close relatives susceptible to cross-pollination.

While the goal in both cases was also the same -- lowering herbicide use -- it's not irrelevant to consider that canola contributes lots of vegetable oil to the world's food supply, while the high-tech bentgrass was destined for golf courses (and perhaps, down the road, some lawns in affluent suburbs).

Because old-fangled grass seed is a $370-million-a-year industry in Oregon, officials of Scotts Miracle-Gro and Monsanto offered safety guarantees against seed or pollen escaping from their experimental bentgrass plantings, including a wide buffer zone around the test plots. But by the time the test crop's seed was harvested two years ago and the modified plants destroyed, scientists had found its pollen well beyond the buffer.

Now bentgrass sampling in wild fields has turned up nine plants with
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the gene that provides Roundup resistance, as far as three miles outside the zone. It's unclear how many of these grew from escaped seed or are essentially wild plants that picked up the resistance gene from drifting pollen.

Either way, it's a nightmare scenario for Oregon's seed producers. If the resistance gene shows up in their grasses, it could kill exports to the many countries that ban genetically modified plants. If it shows up in noxious grasses, their weed-control problems will multiply -- while the usefulness of glyphosate, rather earth-friendly as herbicides go, will correspondingly contract.

Scotts and Monsanto are pressing for federal approval to bring their talented new bentgrass to market. But you've no need to worry that its Roundup resistance will drift into your manicured grass, or your neighbor's weedy yard, or that vacant lot down the street. The Scotts people say the golf courses will surely keep the bentgrass stuff cut so short it won't have a chance to produce pollen or go to seed. Rest assured.

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