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The Grapevine

By Maryann Whitman

GMO Escape

An experimental, genetically modified grass, designed for golf courses, has been found in the wild, several miles from its test site.

In the May/June 2004 "Grapevine" I included a brief mention of genetically modified (GM), Roundup-Ready Creeping Bentgrass (*Agrostis stolonifera* L.). Scott's and Monsanto are testing this plant, hoping to provide it for use in lawns and golf courses. The EPA, which has been monitoring the test plots, has found pollen and specimens as far as 13 miles downwind. Some of the plants found outside the test site, reports *New Scientist*, had grown from seeds produced by the GM parent. Others were hybrids derived from a non-GM plant being pollinated by one of the modified specimens.



The U.S. Department of Agriculture has ordered a full environmental audit of its impact and spread to determine the threat to wildlife. Unlike GM crops, such as maize and soybeans, which are annuals and unable to reproduce, the perennial grass was able to produce seeds during outdoor tests. While the transgenic component of the plant might not in itself pose a problem, the hardy strain could replace many other native grasses if it gains a foothold, ecologists say.

In deciding whether the grass should be deregulated for the commercial market, officials will consider how widespread the grass could become.

Oregon's grass-seed industry, which produces some 70% of seed for U.S. gardeners and groundskeepers, is based in the Willamette Valley, less than 60 miles away from the test site. If the bentgrass reaches there, it would be very hard to eliminate.

While being a pre-European-settlement native in only a few northern states of the U.S., creeping bentgrass is now found in all the continental states except Oklahoma. To most of the states it was brought in from Europe as a forage plant in the mid-1700s.

The ramifications of this corporate experiment could affect the entire country.

Maryann is Editor of the *Wild Ones Journal*, and comes to the position with an extensive background in environmental matters of all kinds.