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MIKE LEE: Artificial turf makes sense for everyone

Staff Reports

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — The best solution for high school football fields surviving the drought in West Texas may have nothing to do with water.

The best solution may be the new artificial turf. Most call it field turf, but since FieldTurf is a trademark name used by one of the companies that manufactures it, we'll just call it the new artificial turf. It's the turf that looks, feels and plays like individual blades of grass planted in tiny rubber pellets.

Last year in West Texas, some schools were hauling in water from other towns. Some weren't able to water their football fields but once a week or once every two weeks. Some coaches said their parched fields were so dry and hard, they feared their players might suffer a concussion from being tackled.

The water situation isn't much better this season, and the new artificial turf doesn't require water.

"With the drought in West Texas, I think it would be hard not to go to turf," said Sterling City coach Clyde Parham, whose school installed turf last year. "With the lack of water and the cost of getting water to the places you need it, I think turf saves money in the long run."

Bronte superintendent Alan Richey recalled eight or nine years ago when his school spent six hours a day hauling enough water from a private well to water its practice field and playing field for less than an hour. It was an uphill battle, and Bronte installed artificial turf in 2010.

"With the water issues we all have in this area, it's well worth the expense of having this kind of turf," Richey said. "When you look at the expense to water a grass field, it looks to me like the state and some of these environmental groups ought to be giving out grants to schools to put in turf. You can spend a lot of money trying to water a grass field, plus a practice field."

With turf, schools may opt to practice on it every day, thus eliminating the need to maintain a practice field separate from the playing field.

"We practice on our turf every day," Bronte football coach Kevin Burns said. "You can't tell where we practiced. It doesn't wear out like grass. We don't even water our practice field anymore.

"If your town doesn't have water, you'll do whatever you have to do to get it. In those situations, watering a football field becomes a pretty low priority."

Ozona hasn't had major water issues in recent years. By installing turf this summer, its football field is guaranteed not to have water issues.

"Year to year, you never know how much rain you're going to get out here and how much water will be available," Ozona coach Ray Brown said. "Even though availability wasn't an issue for us, it still was a major cost."

There are multiple advantages to having turf. There's less maintenance with no mowing, watering or fertilizing. The turf and its rubber surface are softer to land on, which could reduce injuries. The rubber surface also is bouncier and plays faster.

Turf is more consistent than grass. Turf fields drain so quickly, a game doesn't have to be interrupted by a storm unless there's lightning. When grass dies in October or November, turf remains green. Because the new turf is not a rug like Astro Turf, there are no scrapes and rug burns.

And as multiple small-school coaches noted, there's no painting lines on the field for two hours after Wednesday's practice in advance of a Friday home game.

"All we have to do is set out the pylons, and we're ready to play in 15 minutes," Burns said.

Being a solution to the West Texas drought originally wasn't an advantage of the new turf. But it is now.

"To maintain a football field and keep it the caliber of the new turf, you'd need 500,000 to one million gallons of water per year. That's a lot of water," said Ronnie Whitehead, a retired coach and current representative for Fort Worth-based Carter Construction Company, which installed artificial turf at Sterling City, Bronte, Ozona, Blackwell, Forsan, Big Spring, Westbrook and Hermleigh, to name a few.

"When people are rationing the water they use on their yards, and they drive by a football stadium in the heat of the day with the sprinklers going full force, they're not too happy about it. As water has become more expensive and new sources harder to come by, turf just makes sense," Whitehead said.

The drawback at schools that haven't installed turf is the cost — about \$800,000 the first time. But as Whitehead pointed out, that includes building the gravel base and installing the drainage system.

"The excavation and drainage is half the cost," said Whitehead, who noted the new turf lasts 10-12 years. "You don't have to pay for those things again. After the first time,

you're just paying for the turf, and that's about \$400,000. We think a school can make its initial investment in turf back within 15 years."



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