

Can Seeding Native Grass be Economically Feasible?

Submitted by Leanne Thompson for SK PCAP

The right mix of native grasses can produce permanent cover that will remain productive throughout highly variable grazing and weather conditions for generations. Native grasses also provide excellent habitat for a diversity of wildlife. However, the perception by many land-owners is that the cost of seeding native species may be prohibitive. The economics of seeding native grass was one of the many topics discussed last year at the Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan's 2011 Native Prairie Restoration/Reclamation Workshop in Regina, SK. Richard McBride with Ducks Unlimited Canada provided an overview of considerations for those interested in seeding native species.

McBride's presentation provided some background information around the native seed industry as well as some comparisons with tame forage species. He pointed out a number of considerations that will affect the bottom line when looking at different forage species. On the positive side, native species are more sustainable over the long-term so less money may be spent on seed in the long term and once established, native grass stands require very little inputs and can remain productive for decades. By comparison, tame species normally require fertility inputs, and will require more frequent re-seeding.

However, native species can be more expensive to establish in the short term due to fact that native seed is generally more expensive and is less competitive when compared to tame species. Because of this, an additional year or two may be required to properly establish native species. In addition, cover crops are not recommended when seeding native grasses, so a year of no production is part of the establishment cost when using native species.

Many producers ask "Why is native seed so expensive"? The higher cost of native seed can be attributed to a number of factors:

- Often more difficult to produce than tame seed
- Relatively low germination, high dormancy
- Light, fluffy, chaffy seed
- Low seed yields and harvest difficulties (seed shattering)
- Specialized equipment often required (seeding and harvest)
- Limited number of experienced growers
- Poor production year can result in no seed

Given these difficulties, are there some ways that producers who are interested in seeding native species can minimize expenses? McBride provided some suggestions regarding ways to manage costs including:

- Carefully choose the species you want to use
- Find suppliers (always choose the best quality, locally adapted seed)
- Get price quotes on all seed species
- Build a spreadsheet to calculate the cost/acre for each seed species in your mix

McBride also provided some insight into the future of native seed prices. He suggested that for the current situation to change, stronger demand will be necessary. Government programs or other incentives that encourage the seeding of native species may also come into play here. A difficulty with this industry is that due to the long-lived nature of these stands, seed for a given area is purchased very infrequently. Another hurdle is that there is currently little interest in native species by plant breeders and so there is a lack of research and work on these species.

One way producers can help improve the situation is to ask seed suppliers about native species. If there is demand for native seed, suppliers will be more likely to carry them. Also, interested producers should speak to their government representatives about restoring forage breeding efforts. Encouraging large scale seed production such as the Ecovar program should also increase the availability of native seed on the market as well as reduce the price of this commodity.

Seeding native species need not break the bank. Having a detailed management plan that includes choosing the best adapted species mix, doing some homework on seed availability and prices, and talking to suppliers can help ensure that the cost of revegetating with native species is minimized.

The Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan is hosting the second Native Prairie Restoration/Reclamation Workshop on February 8 & 9, 2012 in Saskatoon, SK. This workshop will be an excellent opportunity to learn more about seeding native species and provide networking opportunities with native seed growers and distributors from across the three Prairie Provinces. For workshop details and registration form, please visit the SK PCAP website at www.pcap-sk.org.