

Rangeland Ecology Section Newsletter
July 19, 2001

ESA has been contacted by a TNC representing a coalition interested in native seed issues (basically how to increase the use of native seed). They are searching folks who would be interested in adding their scientific expertise to the effort. Below is the information ESA received from TNC with a request for contacts willing to help on this project. If you are interested please contact, Lori Hiding at ESA (lori@esa.org).

Representatives from the National Cattlemans' Beef Association (NCBA), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) met to discuss a native seed proposal. The overwhelming impression from the meeting is what an enormous job it will be to get thing rolling and technical input is needed for conceptualizing the problem.

The basic issue is to promote the production of native seed. NRCS has one proposed vehicle for doing this (CRP), although NCBA properly suggest that they ought to keep our eye on all the possibilities, including fire money, \$42 million of which is allocated this year to native issues such as restoration, and maybe others. The suggestion was also made that incentive could work better as a "commodity-type payment" rather than rent like in CRP.

The fundamental barrier to production is a stable market. Government demand has fluctuated wildly, and the entry costs are sufficiently high that producers won't want to get in without some assurance of steady demand. The demand is largely, though not exclusively, driven by government programs to restore lands (CRP, fires, others). The question is what kind of market framework should the government support to ensure stable supply. There was agreement among participants in the meeting that government should distort the market as little as possible, while still facilitating production.

Two things need to happen at this juncture for progress to happen.

1. Need survey of government use of seed. Comprehensive, all agencies (or the best we can do).
2. ASTA wants to do a survey of its members to determine whether they would be willing to produce native that is faithful to local eco-region (which as you know is itself subject to some dispute), that are needed by the market (the government). After this information about seed use, and what is needed, is collected, ASTA will include it in survey and also ask its members about the kind of incentives they need to get in to the market.

TNC has begun doing some work to identify seed needs as well. For NRCS's purpose, local eco-regions are broken down by major land resource areas (MLRAs). Each state has several of these. Recognizing that MLRAs (which are based on soil mapping) may not track a biologist's idea of ecoregions for plants, it is still a marker. Other ideas for how eco-regions could be defined for the purpose of collecting this information are encouraged.

Even sticking with MLRAs, the project is enormous. Any ideas on how useful data can be assembled in an efficient manner that would still provide the basis for the ASTA survey?

One more thing. The Cattlemen are interested in focusing this on the west. The biggest restoration needs are probably out there or the midwest. Fire and CRP. Does anyone have thoughts on what the big restoration drivers are out east if any? There have been concrete expressions of interest about this from Georgia and Florida producers but there is no sense for what the systemic drivers for native seed are in the east.