CONSERVATION Showcase

PMC Makes Rancher's Crop a Mission

Grass is the fiber that holds together New Mexico's ranching industry, supports both common and unique wildlife across our vast prairies, and captures sparse rains - preventing erosion and recharging aquifers.

New Mexico ranchers, highway designers, and others are facing a situation, however, where less than a handful of drought tolerant species of native grass seed are commercially available in the state. Such seeds are necessary for ranchers who are rehabilitating rangeland, highway department personnel who are reseeding critical areas that have been disturbed during construction, and other conservationists who have need to rehabilitate or improve New Mexico's expansive grasslands.

About the only native species of very drought tolerant grass available commercially in New Mexico, according to the Plant Materials Center's manager, Greg Fenchel, are Indian ricegrass, sand dropseed, galleta, and alkali sacaton. New Mexico ranchers know there are others, such as mesa dropseed, but they are not commercially available yet. The Plant Materials Center has made it one of its many missions to change this. Given successful development of different existing native grasses, the PMC may then be able to release these species to commercial companies who can use the foundation seed to go into production for ready availability.

With the aid of some NRCS Field Offices, the Plant Materials Center has started the development of a release for mesa dropseed by gathering 21 collections of such seed in the fall of 2006 from rangeland south of Los Lunas – with much of the sampling coming from New Mexico's southwestern counties. It is a species that is very drought tolerant, surviving in precipitation zones of less than seven inches per year. The collections have been planted in a replicated initial evaluation planting at the PMC.

Tobosa planted in a statistical, experimental design

The Plant Materials Center is also working toward a release of tobosa grass by revisiting this species that has been at the Center since the 1980's. Again, tobosa is a very drought tolerant species that survives in precipitation zones of less than seven inches per year. The Plant Materials Center has planted tobosa in a statistical, experimental design that will produce maximum pollination, and is testing it for seed production and seed viability.

Always working to solve New Mexico's conservation puzzles, the Plant Materials Center is on the cutting edge of developing native species for rangeland improvement and rehabilitation, mining reclamation, riparian restoration, wind erosion control, and many other conservation issues.

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