

GRASS SEED PRODUCTION FROM CRP LANDS

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Grass seed supplies are down and the prices are high - should I manage my Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for seed production? Probably not!

With approximately 54,000 acres of CRP contracts scheduled to expire in the fall 1995, people are considering numerous alternatives for the land's future use. One of the largest decision making factors is how can I make a profit? Where is the largest profit margin - cereal grains, alternative crops, grazing, hay, a CRP extension (if available), grass seed production, etc? An economic analysis for all these production alternatives needs to be computed to assist with a decision. The decision needs to provide for profit, but also needs to fit into overall operational plan.

Selecting grass seed production for the future use of CRP grass/legume stands may not be a practical choice. Why?

- *stands are 10 years old and in poor health
- *poor yield potential
- *stands maybe contaminated with noxious weeds, cheatgrass, or other crops
- *stands may be thin, i.e. low plant population
- *new and improved cultivars are available on the market
- *limited market opportunities for common seed
- *too late in season to apply appropriate management practices for a productive 1995 seed crop
- *CRP soil types not conducive to high productivity
- *CRP areas have low precipitation probabilities
- *CRP stands not planted in rows for optimal soil moisture conditions and resultant seed yields.

The pros and cons for each concern should be investigated.

The most successful commercial grass seed growers in Montana grow their seed crops on the highest producing agricultural lands available, i.e. deep loamy soils, irrigated, good moisture holding capacities, low erosion hazards, little saline or sodic soil contaminants, etc. Many producers grow grass seed crops on dryland, but they compensate for inadequate precipitation for seed production by planting their crops in wide-spaced rows - 24-48 inches wide. Good loam soils have the ability to store sufficient moisture into July and fill a profitable seed crop, most years. The ability to irrigate takes much of the risk out of grass seed production plus it allows the grower to manage the water during critical growth stages for optimum production, i.e. late fall and during seed fill. Without irrigation or a moisture reserve during seed fill, the seed weights are low resulting in poor germination and field emergence.

Obviously, most CRP land was qualified due to the soils high erosivity and tendency to be shallow. Their yield potentials, even for dryland grains, is marginal and may not be profitable without price supports. There are no price supports for grass seed crops except for disaster events such as drought, hail, etc.

As mentioned in previous CRP series articles, if a decision is made to retain CRP lands in permanent grass cover, the plants will have to be stimulated to regain productivity. The common practice for cool-season grasses is to mow them to a uniform stubble, apply adequate amounts of N, P, K & S for seed production and irrigate to field capacity in mid-September. These management techniques allow for fall regrowth which assists the plants to initiate seed head primordia. As a general rule, depending on the growing season, the better the soil fertility and moisture conditions going into the late fall the better the seed crop the following growing season.

Projections are that the CRP stands are low in fertility and will require fertilization. The best estimate of nutrient needs for CRP grass seed crops are based on a soil test.

Noxious weeds, other weeds and crops need to be contended with in grass seed crops for a legal salable product. State law does not allow for sale or transport of any seed lots containing prohibited noxious weed seeds, a lot containing an excess of the maximum allowable restricted noxious weed seeds per pound or a lot containing more than 2% total weed seed. The Montana Department of Agriculture can be consulted for specific weed species and their restrictions.

After 30 years of grass seed production experience at the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Bridger Plant Materials Center near Bridger Montana, and from established grass seed growers experiences, grass seed yields decline as the stand gets older. Most growers rotate their grass crops after 4-5 years to maintain optimum seed yields. Older stands of intermediate and pubescent wheatgrasses are particularly sensitive. Plant populations decrease and stands become weedy. Native species like western wheatgrass and thickspike wheatgrass decrease seed production once they are sod-bound.

Grass seed markets also need to be determined. As stated in previous CRP series articles, over 87% of the CRP stands are crested wheatgrass. Over the last 10 years new and improved cultivars (varieties) such as "Hycrest" have been released and have proven themselves superior forage producers to the older cultivars such as 'Nordan'. They are in good demand for establishing new special use pastures. Much of the CRP crested wheatgrass was planted with "common" seed and cultivar, performance or origin is unknown. Today, most land managers are demanding seed of the new improved cultivars for economic sustainability.

If you think that the seed production potential for CRP lands has a high risk, you're right! The bottom line of the previous discussion is that if you are interested in producing grass seed crops you should explore markets for new cultivars and establish modern cultivars using time tested and proven grass seed production techniques. Successful grass seed producers plan ahead and rotate their crops for maximum production. An occasional "windfall" seed crop year happens, but in our dynamic economy, the risk may not be frequent enough to pay the bills - particularly with CRP grass seed crops.

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