

## The Need for Native Seed

A seller's market is good for business, but when it comes to buying native seeds, the BLM and other federal land managers find themselves competing against each other and paying top dollar for a small supply of native seeds. Late season purchases, made when supplies are limited and seed costs are well above average, result in higher costs for habitat restoration.

The need for native seed increased dramatically in the past five years because of wildfires and an emphasis on habitat restoration. Landscape

level restoration projects require a significant investment in seed. Broadcast seedings can require up to 20 pounds of seed per acre and may include 15 to 20 species of grasses, forbs and shrubs to achieve successful results. The BLM Nevada spent roughly \$40 million on grass, forb and shrub seeds after the 1999 and 2000 wildland fire seasons.

To improve and restore Great Basin rangelands, a need exists for readily available native plant seeds adapted to our ecosystems. Since Nevada has a limited native seed →



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### Homegrown is Superior

Locally grown fruits and vegetables are considered to be fresher and tastier than supermarket produce. When it comes to native plants and seeds, locally grown plants offer the best success for the local climate and soil type. Locally harvested and grown plants preserve the unique genetic signature of plants in a specific area, in this case, the Mojave Desert.

Federal land managers have a huge need for native plants for riparian restoration and plantings to reduce fire potential. In an effort to ensure native species are available for restoration projects, the BLM's Las Vegas Field Office has formed a partnership with Outside Las Vegas Foundation, Southern Nevada Restoration Team, Nevada Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The group's goal is to cultivate strains of native grasses derived from locally collected native plant materials, work with local growers to establish a marketable supply, and use the plants to restore riparian areas in high priority

areas such as along the Virgin River and other at risk areas. The high priority areas typically have special status species that are being impacted by invasive weeds.

The project is in its second year of seed collection for inland saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*) and alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*). These two grasses form the basis of restoration materials for Southern Nevada wetlands and riparian areas.

Seeds are collected from a variety of sites, cleaned and developed into foundation stock. Once the foundation stock is developed, the plant materials grown by rural producers will provide a supply for use in restoration projects. Growing native plants could help rural communities develop new economic enterprises.

The reestablishment of native plants through active restoration will inhibit invasive plant species and improve habitat quality for 30 special status species in southern Nevada, particularly the Ash Meadows Refuge, where 12

federally listed species occur.

Federal land agencies receive funding to fight noxious weeds, but those funds often don't stretch far enough to cover the high cost of restoration. A steady supply of locally grown native stock offers the best chance for successful wetlands and riparian restoration.

—Kirsten Cannon  
Las Vegas Field Office

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industry, BLM buys seeds from other states whose adaptability to our range conditions is hit or miss.

The supply and quality of native species collected from wild stands is unpredictable from year to year. BLM needs adequate supply of native seeds and price stability. To achieve that, an interagency group is working to develop native seed production in Nevada. The group is developing a strategy to stimulate Nevada's agricultural economy by increasing production of homegrown native seed. The challenge is to develop a sustainable, consistent market for growers. So far, about a dozen farmers across northern Nevada are interested in the possibilities of growing native seed.

"Nevada producers are always looking for alternative crops," said Jay Davison, plant and soils specialist with the Cooperative Extension Service. "A crop that doesn't need a lot of water has real potential with producers."

Davison is working on developing a seed collection cadre and a native seed field manual that will have information on identification and priority species, recommended collection sites, regulations and



CHRIS ROSS PHOTOS

certification protocols, seed handling and storage and native seed marketing ideas.

The BLM is keenly interested in having a fully operational native seed program where Nevada vendors meet the native seed needs within the state. The Nevada Department of Agriculture has a primary role to coordinate and facilitate a climate where native seed production becomes a viable opportunity for producers. They will develop a program to identify native seed sources and verify site locations and type of seed being collected.

Seed storage is another key factor in having an adequate supply of seeds. Establishing a Great Basin seed warehouse in Nevada could increase seed availability and improve distribution of seed throughout the area. A seed warehouse could also improve seed mixing, bagging and cold storage capabilities. Seed storage for local projects would continue to be essential through short-term leasing arrangements. The Great Basin Seed Warehouse Workgroup is conducting a cost analysis and needs assessment for a seed warehouse in Nevada with the capability to store 1 million pounds of seed.

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