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South Texas Natives eNews

News from the South Texas Natives Program at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute

Native Seed and the Eagle Ford Shale

By Forrest Smith
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Cotulla, TX-The Eagle Ford Shale appears to be one of the most significant oil and gas discoveries in South Texas in decades. Estimates of the number of wells to be drilled are staggering, and there is little doubt that the accompanying infrastructure such as pipelines, roads, frac-water pits, and pad sites will have a significant impact on wildlife habitat in a large portion of South Texas. A cornerstone of good restoration from the standpoint of wildlife is the use of native seed. However, current commercial quantities of native seed releases made by *South Texas Natives* (STN)and our collaborators are unfortunately too low to allow widespread use of the needed seed mixes.

At a recent field tour of the Hixon Ranch near Cotulla, landowners, STN, commercial seed dealers, and restoration consultants discussed current issues related to native seed for the Eagle Ford Shale area. Participants toured demonstration and research plantings at the ranch, and discussed steps that could be taken to insure that more native seed will be available for landowners to conduct good restoration.

Two factors contribute to the current lack of commercial seed in quantities needed for Eagle Ford Shale restoration. One is the timing of the demand. The first native seed releases for South Texas were made in 2007. Several of the early releases, including plains bristlegrass, Arizona cottontop, slender grama, and windmillgrasses are being produced in good quantities commercially. But, many of the other STN and Plant Materials Center (PMC) seed releases have not been in production long enough for large production fields to have been established. When release of a species is made,

Winter 2010

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STN or the PMC provides seed for 1-10 acres of production to commercial seed companies. This amount of seed is what is feasible for STN or the PMC to grow while simultaneously carrying out other seed release development initiatives, and restoration research. Once growers establish their initial production acreage (which may take up to 2 years because of weather), they harvest and replant a portion of that seed. In order to finance added acres of the new product and to begin stimulating demand, most dealers sell 2/3 of the seed produced each year. Seed dealers also spend considerable time and resources developing large scale seed cleaning techniques, refining harvest methods, and learning how to profitably manage the new crop. Bottom line, one acre of production typically provides enough seed for 10-20 acres added production. Thus, the increase process is sequential, bounded by seed yields, economics, and risk on the part of seed growers.

Second, the Eagle Ford Shale was not on anyone's radar screen. While STN and growers have had estimates of traditional native seed markets, such as government conservation programs, highway reclamation, and wildlife habitat restoration plantings, the emergence of the Eagle Ford need could not have been anticipated. As a result, STN and the seed industry are faced with a much larger native seed market. The reality is that both still operate based on prior demand-in STN's case as a research and development program and in the case of seed growers as small businesses. From the seed grower's standpoint, sales of native seed produced to date have been modest. They are hesitant to overproduce these native seeds without greater confidence in a reliable market.

Bottom line, for native seeds recently released by STN, quickly increasing production from a few production acres and a few hundred pounds of seed annually to hundreds of production acres and thousands of pounds of commercial seed will be a challenge. More seed could be grown and made available to growers in early stages of commercialization if funding for STN to do so was available. For the releases that have been available for a few years, the solution is *the development of seed production contracts* between growers and consumers. These contracts would have an immediate impact on seed availability in the near term because such commitments by consumers will give the growers more confidence in the native seed market and result in an immediate expansion of seed production acreages.

Mike Hehman, Hixon Ranch Manager summed up the seed situation in the Eagle Ford area. "Landowners are going to have to place seed orders and get them paid for by the lessees 1-2 years in advance. This is very common in the seed business. Almost all of the corn, milo, wheat, and other crops are grown for seed when contracted prior to it being planted. Support of STN is also essential. Many of the species that are currently being developed (by STN) will be very beneficial to include in the seed mixes for the Eagle Ford Shale region," he added.

If you are interested in contracting the production of native seed for Eagle Ford Shale projects, please contact *South Texas Natives* at (361) 593-4525. We will be glad to introduce you to qualified producers of desired seed.

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