

Why the Ups and Downs of Native Seed Prices?

Supply and demand are the primary reasons native seed prices can fluctuate greatly. The commonly used species have a more consistent demand which helps stabilize the price. Less commonly used species can vary drastically in price from year to year since there may only be a few growers actually harvesting seed in a given year. Weather patterns have a large influence, especially on locally harvested seed sources which may produce only a fair seed crop in a good rainfall year, and no seed in a poor rainfall year. When new varieties of less commonly used species are released, seed prices gradually go down with the increase in supply. Native harvest prairie cordgrass seed was selling for \$150/PLS pound prior to the release of Red River prairie cordgrass in 1998. The last several years' prices have been in the \$20 - \$60 range for Red River.

However, other factors can also have a significant impact on prices. Needle-and-thread and porcupine grass use special processing techniques to remove the awn. Small seeded species such as prairie junegrass and sand dropseed may require special equipment for handling. Sand bluestem and prairie dropseed are traditionally low seed producers. Wetland plant species often need special growing conditions and harvesting equipment.

Native forb and legume seed prices can vary greatly because of factors related to production, harvesting, and processing of the seed. Dotted gayfeather is a good example of a plant species that has seed that is difficult to harvest and process, resulting in high seed cost.

Varieties or cultivars generally sell for less than local seed sources because they are better seed producers. Conservation planners are cautioned to know the average seed cost before

including a species in a planting plan. High seed costs for one or two species may greatly increase the per acre cost of the seed mix. Options available to the planner include reducing the percentage of the high cost species, or substituting a lower cost species. Prices may



WRP planting in east-central North Dakota shown four months after seeding. Fifty percent of the mix was forbs and legumes. A total of 40 species were included in the mix for an average seed cost of \$83 per acre in 2005. Seed costs were kept in check by using adapted varieties whenever possible, and by reducing the percentage or eliminating higher cost species.

vary 50 to 100 percent based on regional demand and what the vendor has on the shelf, especially for the minor use species. Included in the table below are examples of current averaged seed costs per PLS pound for some higher cost native plant species.

Grasses		Forbs/Legumes	
Needle-and-thread	\$75	Dotted gayfeather	\$300
Porcupine grass	\$120	Leadplant	\$120
Blue-joint reedgrass	\$240	Narrow-leaved purple coneflower	\$120
Fowl mannagrass	\$80	Stiff sunflower	\$150
Prairie junegrass	\$30	Shell-leaf penstemon	\$130
Prairie dropseed	\$90	New England aster	\$175

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Seed Testing Reminder

As spring approaches, remember to check your seed lots or remind your producers to make sure that their seed has a current seed test. Most States require a new germination test be completed within a nine-month period, not counting the month of testing, if seed is being purchased or sold. Most cost-share programs also require that seed have a current seed test to help assure the proper seeding rates are being planted. Even if a seed test is not required, a new seed test may be warranted if seed has been stored under less than ideal conditions. Germination can drop rapidly on seed if improperly stored. Heat and humidity are the major killers of stored seed. Seed vendors are aware of the testing requirement, but it is easy to forget about retesting personal seed stored in your bin or shop. Grass and forb species take from 14 days to 28 days to complete a germination test. A seed sample will need to be sent to the lab well in advance of the planned seeding date to allow enough time for the test to be completed.

Seed germination tests are defined by the Association of Official Seed Analysts (AOSA). These rules are the standard followed by seed testing labs in conducting seed tests. As an example, switchgrass requires a 28-day germination test compared to 14 days for big bluestem. Seed that germinates during that time period is considered as a percentage of seed germination and listed on the seed tag as germination. In most cases, seed dormancy is determined by running a tetrazolium (TZ) test on the ungerminated seed at the end of the germination test. Any remaining seed that is respiring and alive is recorded as dormant seed. This dormant seed amount will be reflected as a percentage of seed on the seed tag as well. In some cases, dormant seed is referred to as hard seed. The total germination is determined by adding the percentage of germination to the percentage of dormant or hard seed.

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