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BISMARCK PLANT MATERIALS CENTER

N O R T H L A N D N E W S

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**“HELPING PEOPLE
 HELP THE LAND”**

Who We Are

Wayne Duckwitz, PMC Manager

The Bismarck Plant Materials Center (PMC) is one of 27 plant materials centers operated by the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Bismarck Plant Materials Center serves the areas of North and South Dakota and Minnesota.

It is the mission of the plant materials program to develop plant materials and plant science technology for the conservation of our natural resources. Our current work at the PMC focuses on 10 major conservation objectives:



- Native Prairie Ecosystem Restoration
- Wetland and Riparian Plant Materials
- Streambank and Lakeshore Stabilization
- Tree and Shrub Technology
- Warm-season Grass Promotion and Development
- Saline/Alkaline Tolerant Plant Materials
- Filter Strips and Nutrient Management
- Urban Conservation
- Alternative Income Plants
- Education and Information Technology Transfer

This is a brief summary of 2005 activities at the PMC. For additional information on the studies, please contact us at the PMC.

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Seed Collections Needed

Mike Knudson, Forester

In 2006, the PMC will be looking for new collections of prairie junegrass (*Koeleria cristata*). This cool-season bunchgrass is an important range plant in the Northern Great Plains. The PMC is asking for five collections from most areas in the three states of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. Collectors will be asked to clip seed heads, put them in an envelope with site information, and return to the PMC.

The PMC will also be collecting seed from skunkbush sumac (*Rhus trilobata*) in western North and South Dakota, as well as eastern Wyoming and Montana. One of the main goals of this study is to find plants with less leaf-spot disease. Collecting seed from taller plants is desired.

The PMC is continuing to collect seed from several native forbs. Indian breadroot (*Pediomelum esculentum*) is a legume which grows on dry prairies. The PMC still needs additional collections from North and South Dakota, as well as Minnesota. Keep an eye out for it in late June. Cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*) is a large wildflower which grows on wetter soils. It is found in southern Minnesota, and in eastern North and South Dakota. In North Dakota, it has been known to grow in Cass, Ransom, Richland, and Sargent Counties. If you enjoy looking for native plants, be on the lookout for some of these species.

Perennial Food Plots for Wildlife Habitat

Wayne Duckwitz, PMC Manager

The Bismarck PMC and the North Dakota State Game and Fish Department are cooperating in a study evaluating both native and introduced perennial species and their potential to provide wildlife food and cover. Two different seed mixes were no-till seeded into chemically killed and burned sod in the fall of 2004 at two locations in central North Dakota. The native mix included 32 native species and the introduced mix contained 18 species. Both seed mixes contained grasses, legumes, forbs, and shrubs. The mixes were planned with high percentages of forbs and legumes. The high percentages of flowers in the mix should provide seed and forage along with the potential for high insect populations which are a main food source for young birds. The native mix consisted of 20 percent grasses, 30 percent legumes, 50 percent forbs, and 10 percent shrubs. The introduced mix consisted of 20 percent grasses, 70 percent legumes, and 10 percent shrubs. Data was collected in the summer of 2005 on seedling establishment and performance. One of our main concerns with the planting was the competition from annual weeds, Canada thistle, and absinth wormwood, which showed up in fairly high densities on most of the plots. Overall, the native species plots looked the best with most planted species showing up in the 2.4-ft² frames. The introduced seeding also had fairly good species diversity. We hope to develop a list of recommended species to use when planting perennial food plots. This list will include those species that establish quickly and compete with weeds and provide a seed and browse source for wildlife species. We also will be looking at species that harbor pollinating insects and insects that are a food source for wildlife, primarily young bird broods. The stands should improve in 2006, and additional data will be collected.



Releases Discontinued

Wayne Duckwitz, PMC Manager

The Bismarck PMC has discontinued the foundation seed production of Mandan-759 pubescent wheatgrass. Mandan-759 has been replaced with the improved variety Maska pubescent wheatgrass. Two western wheatgrass germplasms, ND-WWG932 and ND-WWG931, have been discontinued and no further research work is being done with them at this time. All three discontinued releases are currently in long-term preservation with the National Plant Germplasm System (NPGS) and are available to researchers through the NPGS.

Conservation Field Trials

Dwight Tober, Plant Materials Specialist

The PMC assists cooperators with more extensive demonstration plantings that we call Conservation Field Trials. The Plant Materials Manual defines this as a “tool for evaluating technology for addressing local soil and water resource problems.” This may involve a study or be established based on a local need. Usually there is follow-up or additional planting done on an annual basis for several years. Data is generally collected and information summarized in the Annual Technical Report. Cooperators often include cities, county parks, RC&Ds, SCDs, other agencies, or wildlife groups/organizations. A good example of a Conservation Field Trial was conducted last spring at Eagle Lake Park, near Frazee, Minnesota. Dean Schmidt, WesMin RC&D Coordinator at Alexandria, asked



Dean Schmidt, WestMin RC&D Coordinator, getting started in May 2005.



Swimming beach and stabilized slopes using native species, August 2005.

for assistance with stabilizing a dangerous cut bank at a popular swimming beach/boat ramp facility at a heavily used local county park. The performance of native species will be evaluated in stabilizing the newly shaped and mulched shoreline. The WesMin RC&D and the Bismarck PMC were involved in a similar project several years ago on Otter Tail Lake. The native grass species that performed well on that site included little bluestem, sideoats grama, and western wheatgrass. The same species would be tried at the Eagle Lake site, as well as purple prairieclover, shell-leaved penstemon, and false indigo. The PMC recently released Survivor Germplasm false indigo for lakeshore stabilization, and this would be a good trial to monitor establishment from seed. The field trial was off to an excellent start, and the shoreline cover planting was well established by late summer. Plant counts and vegetation monitoring will continue next season.

The Sweetgrass Story

Dwight Tober, Plant Materials Specialist

Sweetgrass (*Hierochloe odorata*) is a native grass traditionally used by Native American cultures for many purposes. The source of sweetgrass's aroma, which smells like vanilla, is coumarin. This plant compound has been used for hundreds of years as a plant extract for both fragrance and medicinal use. Native American cultures burn braided sweetgrass twists in traditional ceremonies, using the sweet scented smoke as a purifying incense. The species is locally subject to over-collecting and is sensitive to grazing.

A collection of northern hardy sweetgrass originating from a sandbar in the Missouri River near Bismarck has been distributed throughout the three-state area for testing and tribal propagation. Propagation beds have been established at numerous reservations with plants being increased and distributed to tribal members. The process begins each spring at the Bismarck PMC when rhizomes of sweetgrass are harvested from a sprigging bed in April to fill requests received through each state plant materials committee. The rhizomes are divided and put into small individual containers to grow out in the greenhouse. It is an early, cool-season species, and growth is rapid. Often there are seedheads formed in the greenhouse within three weeks of transplanting. The plants are hardened off in May in the lathhouse, and 10 plants each are readied to ship to cooperators at the end of the month. When the young plants are placed in a garden like setting with good weed control, the plants establish quickly and rhizomes can spread rapidly. Hundreds of new plants from rhizomes the first year are possible, and thousands the second year. Approximately 165 orders of sweetgrass have been distributed in the last seven years. The number of rhizomes that have been produced from those plants in that time would surely be in the millions!



Foundation Seed

Dwight Tober, Plant Materials Specialist

This may be the year to consider establishing that new certified seed field of your favorite Bismarck PMC release! Most of the native releases no longer have a waiting list. Seed is on the shelf and available on a first-come, first-served basis. Foundation seed harvest at the PMC this year was down for the cool-season species due to a wet, cool spring, and up on most of the warm-season because of the favorable summer weather. Rains, which seemed to come at the right time, also helped.



The introduced forage grasses have been in demand, and our inventories are beginning to tighten up for Manska pubescent wheatgrass, Reliant intermediate wheatgrass, and Nordan crested wheatgrass. Western wheatgrass is in short supply on the commercial market, and the PMC currently has no supply of foundation Rodan seed. We had an excellent crop of the Bismarck Natural Germplasm purple prairieclover. Seed is available. Maximilian sunflower is another species gaining in popularity, and northern seed sources are often hard to find. We have a good supply of Medicine Creek Natural Germplasm on the shelf. I can't imagine many native plantings being seeded without both of these valuable forb species being included. Current seed prices are posted on the Bismarck PMC website, as shown on the cover page of this report.

National Park Projects

Nancy Jensen, Agronomist

The National Park Service, in managing its many parks, has a need to preserve the native plant resources and revegetate disturbed park lands. It requires the use of germplasm from populations as closely related genetically and ecologically as possible to park populations. The National Park Service does not have the personnel, expertise, or equipment needed to propagate quantities of the required seed and plants. The USDA, NRCS Plant Materials Program has agreed to develop native herbaceous and woody plant materials for use on disturbed areas within National Parks.

The Bismarck Plant Materials Center (PMC) recently began projects with Wind Cave National Park (WICA) in South Dakota and Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (LIBI) in eastern Montana. Seed of four grass species will be grown for LIBI, including: green needlegrass (*Nassella viridula*), bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), and blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*). Seed of twelve forbs and grasses will be grown for WICA. The twelve species (*continued on next page*)

include: western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), purple threeawn (*Aristida purpurea*), prairie junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*), bottlebrush squirreltail (*Elymus elymoides*), wavyleaf thistle (*Cirsium undulatum*), purple prairieclover (*Dalea purpurea*), scarlet globemallow* (*Sphaeralcea coccinea*), and Missouri milkvetch* (*Astragalus missouriensis*). Many of the species have not been grown by the PMC in the past. We are excited for this challenge and opportunity to assist the National Parks and to learn about species that may have potential for other conservation uses.

*These species substituted with slender crazyweed (*Oxytropis campestris*) and Lambert crazyweed (*Oxytropis lambertii*).

Four-wing Saltbush

Nancy Jensen, Agronomist



Four-wing saltbush is a small shrubby species distributed throughout Western North America where precipitation ranges from 6-14 inches rainfall. It grows on a wide array of soils from clays to sands and can tolerate saline and alkaline conditions. The plant is highly palatable to most livestock and big game. It is also a food source for various game birds, and small mammals. The plants are many branched with narrow, gray-green leaves that remain evergreen. Their color is due to deposits of salt excreted from tiny hairs on the leaf surface, an adaptation to prevent the build-up of salt in the plant tissues. This salt deposit helps reflect light, shielding the leaves from excessive exposure to sun. Four-wing saltbush has male and female flowers on separate plants. Seeds, produced on the female plant, have four papery wings which aid in dispersal and seed protection. Its extensive root system provides excellent erosion control.

The PMC is currently growing and evaluating a collection of four-wing from western South Dakota. Seedlings propagated in the greenhouse were planted to a field at the PMC in 2001 and 2003. Seed is being collected and plant characteristics noted. We will continue to harvest seed, look at weed control options, and evaluate forage potential in anticipation of a release. An additional evaluation to compare a Wyoming source of four-wing, the South Dakota source, and Wytana (a release from MT that is an *Atriplex* cross) is also planted at the PMC. It is interesting to see the variation in growth of these different sources.

Indiangrass, Not Just For Prairies Anymore!

Nancy Jensen, Agronomist

Those of you thinking that the color of all grass is either green, when watered, or brown when not, have never seen the true colors and textures displayed by some of the native grasses. Indiangrass is one such grass. It is a tall, perennial, warm-season grass of the tall and mixed grass prairies of the eastern Great Plains. The plant is quite attractive with its gray-green leaf blades and golden to reddish bronze, fluffy seed heads. It is also palatable to grazing livestock and can be cut for hay before the flower stalks develop.

The PMC, along with Dr. Arvid Boe, South Dakota State University (SDSU) and Dr. Mary Meyer, University of Minnesota (U of M), began a study in 2005 to develop an Indiangrass release for conservation landscaping. We are also evaluating the plants for forage production in hopes of a second release. Plants were selected from test plots of South Dakota collections at SDSU that displayed a vast array of colors, sizes, and shapes. Other plants were also collected in Minnesota and North Dakota. Plantlets were grown in the greenhouse for 4-6 weeks and planted to an evaluation plot at the Bismarck PMC. The South Dakota collections were also planted for evaluation by Dr. Meyer at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Color and shape differences were already evident among the plants in the PMC plot by the fall of 2005.



Sand Traps

Nancy Jensen, Agronomist

Ever thought of the similarities between golf and conservation? Bare sand is disastrous for both! No, it's not the golf game that we are studying! Prairie sandreed (*Calamovilfa longifolia*) and sand bluestem (*Andropogon hallii*) are sand loving grasses currently being evaluated for conservation and release.

Prairie sandreed is a tall, perennial, warm-season grass. Its dense and extensive rhizomes make it well adapted to binding sandy soils. Intended uses of a release include range and pasture seeding, critical area stabilization, upland bird habitat, and winter standing feed. Current prairie sandreed releases are not proven to be well adapted to eastern North Dakota and South Dakota or western Minnesota. Rust and other foliar diseases are often a problem. In 2003, seed of prairie sandreed was collected from various locations in South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota. Seed of 34 different collections plus ND-95 and the variety Goshen were propagated in the greenhouse and seedlings were planted to an evaluation block in the spring of 2004. In 2005, data was collected for rhizome spread, disease, size, and other general characteristics. It is interesting to see the differences showing up among the collections.

Sand bluestem is a close relative of big bluestem. Its longer creeping rhizomes, hairless leaves and stems, and dense yellow hairs on the seed head distinguish it from big bluestem. It occurs primarily on sandy soils. It is not as palatable as big bluestem but does provide excellent grazing on deep sandy soils. 'Garden' is currently the available variety of sand bluestem used in the Northern Great Plains. Originating in Nebraska, it is marginally adapted to the northernmost areas of the Great Plains. The process of selecting a new release began with seed collections from the three-state area in 2003 and 2004. Twenty native collections plus 'Garden' were propagated in the greenhouse and planted to an evaluation block in 2005. They will be evaluated for seed production, forage, rhizome spread, and other characteristics in the next few years before selections are made to produce a release.

Sand traps.....good in conservation, bad in golf!

Increasing the Non-Grass Component of Native Seedings*

Dwight A. Tober, USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program, Bismarck, ND; and Merle O. Bennett, North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, Bismarck, ND. *7/29/05, Abstract accepted for presentation at the Society for Range Management 59th Annual Meeting, February 11-17, 2006, Vancouver, B. C.

Native seedings in the Northern Great Plains have evolved from mixtures typically including only a few grass species to diverse mixtures of a dozen or more species with a component of 10 percent to 20 percent forbs, shrubs, and legumes. Depending on the objective of the planting, there may be advantages to increasing the non-grass component to 50 percent or more of the total mixture. Adapted seed sources of native forbs, legumes and shrubs are more readily available today compared to 10 years ago. Many wildlife species prefer moderately open grasslands with a diversity of forbs, legumes, and shrubs for nesting, feeding, and brood-rearing, while the more dense, higher canopy grass stands are preferred for escape and winter cover. Grasslands that are 50 percent or more non-grass species are preferred nesting sites because they host high quantities of insects and protein rich plants that are used by young wildlife species, including upland game birds. The North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, cooperatively with the USDA-NRCS, is utilizing the Wetlands Reserve Program to develop the 1,400-acre Robert L. Morgan Wildlife Management Area in east central North Dakota. The restoration process had a goal of seeding at least 50 percent native forbs, legumes, and shrubs. Forty-five plant species were seeded including 50 percent non-grass species as calculated by seeds per square foot based on a percentage of the full-seeding rate. Seed costs averaged \$88 per acre for seeding 815 acres in 2004 and 2005.



Field Plantings Summary

Dwight Tober, Plant Materials Specialist

Thanks again to all of the field, area, and state office staff who help collect data, gather and organize the field planting forms, and make sure everything is accounted for prior to the annual state committee meetings. We are still averaging over 100 active field plantings annually in the three states. Rachel Bergsagel, PMC biological technician, uses her plant and computer expertise to summarize and verify each plant record. Field plantings provide valuable plant information under actual use conditions. This method of plant evaluation is the backbone of the plant materials testing program and creates a unique partnership between (continued on next page)

the PMC and the field office. The willingness and “experimental nature” of the cooperators who actually test these plants on their farms is greatly appreciated. Some of these plantings fail for various reasons, which is also part of the testing process. The following information will provide a brief summary on the plants tested in field plantings the last five years.

Black Chokeberry 323957 (tested in 2000 and 2002) This native source, small shrub has performed well throughout Minnesota, and the eastern Dakotas. Rabbits have sometimes hindered plant establishment and have been the main problem. Heavy fruit production has occurred as early as the second year. Fruit is great for juice and wine. No disease or insect problems have been noted. It has striking red fall leaf color. It is scheduled for field review this summer, and formal release in 2008.



Sweetgrass 9063128 (tested in 2001 and 2002) This North Dakota native source has performed well on a variety of sites. The best establishment has been with good weed control. This source has been distributed annually since 2003 for tribal propagation. There are no plans for formal release.

Gray Dogwood 9082738 (tested in 2003 and 2004) This Wisconsin source native shrub has performed fairly well with good weed control on better sites in Minnesota and the eastern Dakotas. Growth is slower than redosier dogwood. This is a species evaluation. There are no plans for release of this source.

Slough Sedge 9082679 (tested in 2003 and 2004) A strongly rhizomatous, cool-season wet meadow species, this vegetative composite originates from the three states and Manitoba. Planting has been by bareroot rhizomes. Survival and establishment success has been mixed, but this has often been a problem of fluctuating water levels and flooding. Rhizome spread and site stabilization was rated high in many field plantings. Overall, I think there have been adequate successful plantings to warrant potential release as a vegetative selection. The main concern is whether the commercial nursery/wetland plant market will support a formal release at this time.

Amur Chokecherry 9082853 (tested in 2004 and 2005) This attractive, introduced small tree has had problems with establishment. Survival ratings vary across the board, but most plantings have averaged less than 50 percent. There seems to be a plant dormancy problem and many of the plants do not leaf out after planting. However, there have been a few plantings with 100 percent survival and the plants have been rated high. The recommendation at this time is that this species not be planted for conservation use in this area because of poor establishment.

Common Chokecherry 9008183 (tested in 2005) This is a less disease susceptible and heavy fruit producing selection from central North Dakota. Too early to tell on performance, but establishment year data indicates survival averaging over 95 percent and good growth.

Grass Demo Plots

Dwight Tober, Plant Materials Specialist



Demonstration plots are a great way to display and/or evaluate familiar and unfamiliar species in an area. This was the third year of data collection on the 52 entries in the Kent Otto grass, forb, and legume demonstration plots. The site is located in Eddy County, cooperative with the Soil Conservation District and the New Rockford Field Office. The cooperators and the landowner have done an excellent job maintaining the plots and putting up signs. Kentucky bluegrass and quackgrass are invading the site and have spread into the plots on the east end. Spot spraying was done in the spring. The dormant warm-season grasses were sprayed with glyphosate and responded very well. Cool-season production was considerably less than last year. Selected plots were clipped by hand on August 31, 2005, with assistance from several field offices. Twenty-seven plots were clipped and the forage samples were oven-dried and calculated in pounds per acre. The top five forage producers in decreasing order included tall wheatgrass (5,561 lb/ac), cicer milkvetch (5,355 lb/ac), little bluestem (4,915 lb/ac), switchgrass (4,723 lb/ac), and big bluestem (4,583 lb/ac). The lowest five forage producers in increasing order included smooth brome grass (588 lb/ac), western wheatgrass (810 lb/ac), needle and thread (820 lb/ac), blue grama (909 lb/ac), and creeping foxtail (989 lb/ac).

Prairie Dropseed

Nancy Jensen, Agronomist

Someday, while walking through a mixed-grass prairie, you may literally stumble upon an attractive little plant known as prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*). Prairie dropseed grows in circular, dense clumps that are slightly elevated. It is a warm-season, perennial grass that is native from Saskatchewan to Quebec and New York, south and west to Texas and Wyoming. It prefers moister prairies with light textured soils. Its leaves are narrow and fine textured and radiate from the center of the clump. Prairie dropseed produces round, shiny, hard seeds in open branched heads. When flowering, it has a vanilla-like aroma.



The PMC is currently working with three collections of prairie dropseed. The collections are from Burleigh County in North Dakota, Mahnommen County in Minnesota, and Day County in South Dakota. The North Dakota and Minnesota collections were planted in 2000 and 2002, respectively. Seed from South Dakota was collected in 2005 and will be planted in 2006. Seed was propagated in the greenhouse and 30-50 plants were lined out in single rows for the North Dakota and Minnesota collections. The South Dakota collection will be propagated in the greenhouse in 2006 and lined out beside the other collections. Seed continues to be harvested from the rows at the PMC and plant characteristics recorded. Once all collections are producing seed, plans are to mix seed of the three accessions to produce a new population for release in the next few years.

Prairie dropseed has potential for many uses. It makes an excellent habitat and food source for small wildlife. It can be planted for livestock grazing and for restoring disturbed prairies. Its tufted nature and delicate, showy seed heads make it very desirable in landscaping.

Strawberry Clover

Nancy Jensen, Agronomist

Strawberry clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) is a legume that is somewhat tolerant of saline and alkaline soils. It likes moisture, and has a prolific vegetative spread by stolons and produces an abundance of seed. It is palatable to livestock, but is very low growing. It is native to Europe.



The PMC is currently evaluating a self pollinated population collected by Dr. Arvid Boe, near South Dakota State University. It is thought to be a remnant of past research plots. The seed was propagated in the greenhouse in 2004 and space planted in rows to a field at the PMC. The plants were prolific vegetative spreaders and could compete with annual weeds. Plants grew to an approximate height of one foot. Deer and rabbits heavily grazed the plants. Seed was produced and harvested the first year. In 2005, the stand became solid, rather than stay in rows. The plants produced an abundance of seed. Harvest was difficult due to its short stature. Plans are to continue monitoring the plants growth at the PMC. We are also interested in establishing a small test plot at an off-center site to look at its saline or alkaline tolerance. Please let us know of any location where we may establish such a plot.

2006 Field Office Training Scheduled

Wayne Duckwitz, PMC Manager

The Plant Materials Training session is scheduled for August 1-3, 2006. The session will be held at the Bismarck Plant Materials Center. For those interested in attending, please contact your supervisor. A tentative agenda is available from the Plant Materials Center for those wanting to see the subject matter to be covered.

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