

Managing Native Grass Forages

Patrick Keyser, Professor and Director, Center for Native Grasslands Management

Cost Share for Establishing Native Grass Forages

For folks who may be interested in establishing native grasses as a component of their forage program, now is a very good time to be planning for spring 2015's planting season. However you choose to go about your planting project, there will be costs associated with diesel, weed control, seed itself, and perhaps lime or fertilizer. While many of these costs will be based on prevailing markets, one step you can take to lower the pinch on your wallet is to sign up for EQIP cost share.

What is EQIP? It is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This is not a new program and many of you may already be familiar with or even have participated in it. The program provides both technical assistance and cost-share to farmers to implement improved production and conservation practices on their land. One option producers can sign up for is the "Forage Biomass Planting" that provides cost share for establishing native grass forages.

In a nutshell, this practice provides producers \$316.09 per acre to plant perennial native grass forages. Contracts are typically for 3 years with production allowed during year 3. Some reduced production is provided for in year 2 under many contracts. New and limited resource farmers can qualify for a slightly higher cost-share of \$358.61 per acre. Those rates apply to mixed-species plantings (typically, big bluestem, little bluestem, indiangrass, etc.), but a lower cost share rate is available for single-species plantings (typically switchgrass or eastern gamagrass).

Although EQIP sign-up is continuous (you can apply at any time during the year), ranking of applications only occurs once per year, typically during winter. In Tennessee for 2015 for example, an announcement for new applications is likely to be made in early December. Those applications will be ranked based on pre-determined criteria with higher ranked applications funded until money runs out. Lower ranked applicants would not be funded. Those that are funded then work with their local NRCS office to develop a contract for completing the work and scheduling payments.

If you are interested in exploring EQIP, contact your county NRCS office. This link will take you to a directory if you are not sure where your county office is located: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/tn/contact/local/>. The folks at the local offices can provide you with further detail on how to apply for EQIP and answer any questions you may have. Off-setting the cost of establishment, including fore-gone forage production during the transition period, can help make developing improved forages on your farm much easier – and save you money in the long run with the enhanced gains, greater drought resiliency, and lower input costs natives can offer.