

Natives First – Consider Native Vegetation First

Frequently Asked Questions

Natives First promotes the use of native plants in as many publicly funded conservation practices as feasible, with the ultimate goal of natives becoming the default choice, when and where appropriate. A shift to a Natives First native vegetation standard will benefit soil, air and water quality and provide wildlife habitat as well as high quality, low input, drought-tolerant forage for agricultural producers. This document is intended to answer frequently asked questions. For further information or to become a part of the Natives First Coalition, please contact Jef Hodges, Grassland Coordinator, National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative at: jhodge34@utk.edu or visit www.bringbackbobwhites.org/Natives_First.

Q: Does Natives First advocate complete exclusion of all introduced plant species from publicly funded conservation practices?

A: No. It's Natives First, NOT Natives Only. We recognize that in some circumstances introduced species fill conservation needs. We promote natives becoming the default choice for publicly funded conservation programs due to their greater range of ecological benefits, multi-purpose utility and natural adaptations to local conditions. However, it's not an all or nothing proposal.

Q: Does Natives First advocate elimination of all introduced species on private lands?

A: Conservation actions on private lands are voluntary. If private landowners desire to maintain existing introduced vegetation, they have a right to do so. Our message is that going forward publicly funded conservation actions should utilize native plants due to their natural multi-use benefits for clean air, water and increased wildlife habitat.

Q: Aren't introduced species better for soil and water conservation than native plants?

A: No. The scientific literature shows that native grasses provide equal or greater soil and water conservation benefits in almost all cases compared to introduced species. Please refer to Native Warm-Season Grass Roles in Soil and Water Conservation: A Literature Synthesis by the University of Tennessee Center for Native Grasslands Management.

Q: Has Natives First taken into consideration the needs of agricultural producers and if those needs can be met utilizing native plants?

A: Yes. Producers were part of the working group that created the Natives First proposal, along with federal and state agencies, conservation non-profits, academia and seed industry representatives. Natives First is dependent upon producers' acceptance to be successful. The economics of forage production are shifting and are favoring increased use of native grass forage. As the cost of inputs such as fertilizer and herbicide continue to rise, the profit margin from utilizing introduced grass forage which is dependent on them, is diminishing or negative. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture (UTIA) economic analyses show that at \$400/ton nitrogen, there is already a negative return on investment for Bermuda grass, while native grasses remain positive. Many producers are already beginning to incorporate native forage into their operations as a wise business decision, independent of concern for wildlife and the environment.

Q: Is Natives First focused solely on bobwhites, what about other species and natural resource concerns?

A: Natives First is not focused solely on bobwhites. The National Bobwhite Technical Committee (NBTC) has identified lack of appropriate grassland and declining grassland quality as major factors in the bobwhites decline. An objective of the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI) is to increase and/or improve native grasslands for the benefit of bobwhites and other grassland species. Native plant landscapes maximize beneficial ecosystem services such as providing clean air, water and healthy soil, as well as provide habitat for native wildlife and pollinators. Conservation actions should not prioritize one resource over another when there are solutions that will benefit many. We welcome input on how to best incorporate the needs of other stakeholders, natural resource concerns and wildlife species into Natives First.

Q: How do the economics of native compete in the long-run with introduced species?

A: For livestock and forage production, the answer fluctuates with the price of inputs such as fertilizer, herbicide, fuel and seed. As input prices rise, introduced species lose their competitive edge economically. Natives may be more expensive to establish initially; however, they provide greater benefits through healthier water, soil, air, pollinators, wildlife and quality forage, while requiring fewer costly inputs to maintain the stand. In the long run it's cheaper to plant and manage natives than it is to plant and then continually maintain introduced species.

Q: Are you telling me my father and grandfather were wrong? That sounds like an indictment of their land stewardship.

A: We're not second guessing past actions. When input prices were low, introduced grass forages benefited many livestock and forage producers. This put money in landowners' pockets, kept the lights on and put food on the table. Landowners in this country have always displayed a remarkable ability to adapt to meet changing conditions in order to maintain viable ag operations and keep the farmer and rancher on the land. The economic realities today's landowners face are different than those of the past. Only in the last decade have we come to recognize the full economic impact of endophyte infected tall fescue. Converting a portion of tall fescue pastures to natives will lessen those economic losses.

Q: Even if willing, do you think the USDA can immediately transition to much greater use of native plants?

A: No one expects the transition to natives to happen overnight. We recognize that it will take some time for USDA to adjust programs and educate their personnel and producers about the benefits of native plants as well as their establishment and differing management practices.

Q: Isn't the cost of native plant seed prohibitively expensive?

A: There are a number of variables to consider before being able to answer that question. It depends on the species used, planting rate, diversity of the mix and seed supply. Native plant seed is generally higher when compared pound per pound, however planting rates and other input costs are lower. Cost per acre to establish a stand of commonly used native forage species is very competitive with cost per acre to establish novel endophyte tall fescue. Analyses by UTIA showed a greater return on investment for livestock and haying operations from native warm-season grasses than introduced species over a 10-year period, including prorated establishment costs.

Q: Does Natives First dictate only locally-adapted seed be used?

A: Though it is encouraged, Natives First does not rely exclusively on locally adapted seed. It is entirely up to the landowner and conservation planner to choose the correct seed source for the application. Forage producers may want to use seed from cultivars selected for forage, while prairie restorations will want to use only local ecotype seed.

Q: Will enough native seed be available to fill the demand if USDA switches to a Natives First policy?

A: Historically seed vendors have responded to increased programmatic demands by ramping up production. If the policy is fully adopted, it will likely take the seed industry two or three years to catch up with demand. Natives First is sensitive to the issue of supply and demand and has flexibility built-in to deal with supply issues. In addition, the seed industry has been involved in developing Natives First and is informed so they can anticipate demand.

Q: How much diversity is enough?

A: It depends on your goal. If your goal is native prairie restoration, you will need a very diverse seed mix. If your goal is a solid native forage base for a livestock or haying operation, then anything beyond 3-4 of the key NWSG species may produce diminishing return. If grassland bird habitat is the goal, adding 10-15 native forbs to 3-5 grass species is an excellent start. For pollinators, you need a diverse mix of native forbs that flower and attract pollinators throughout the spring, summer and fall. Bottom line – Natives First is about promoting the use of native plants, not setting a one-size-fits-all standard for diversity.

Q: Is planting natives in a field surrounded by a landscape of introduced species a waste of time and money?

A: No, but it may present more of a challenge with invasion of introduced species, especially during the establishment of the stand. Be vigilant and monitor the native stand regularly for invading, unwanted species. Cool-season species in native warm-season grasses can easily be controlled with herbicide treatment during the native grasses' dormant season or managed with prescribed burning. Warm-season invaders can only be controlled by timely spot application of herbicide. If there is potential for warm-season introduced species to invade, it is important to catch any problems early and treat immediately.

Q: Do we know how to establish native species?

A: Yes. Technology for establishing native species has advanced significantly in the last two decades. Seed cleaning and planting equipment has improved and herbicides for weed control are labeled for establishing native species. This new technical advice is readily available from USDA field offices, state fish and game agencies, university extension programs, seed vendors and online.

Q: Don't introduced plants provide some wildlife habitat?

A: Yes, in some cases introduced species can provide limited wildlife habitat, such as dense nesting cover for ducks in northern states. However, across much of the country, introduced grass species form dense, monotypic stands that provide little to no wildlife habitat or their management eliminates cover.

- Q: Will we have to change how we manage our pastures and hayfields if we convert them to natives?**
- A:** Yes. In general, native grasses need to be managed quite differently than introduced species. Mowing bars will have to be set much higher to prevent damage to bunch grass bases and grazing animals will need to be managed in a way that leaves taller stubble heights and allows longer recovery periods for plant growth.
- Q: How do I manage forage lost during establishment, which may take up to 2 or 3 years?**
- A:** The time required to establish a native grass planting varies by rainfall, soil type, weed pressure and grass species and it does sometimes take several years for a planting to become established. As long as proper planting techniques have been followed, Mother Nature cooperates with timely rainfall and weeds are controlled, it is not uncommon to be able to use a stand in as little as a year. Regardless, to guard against a shortage of forage the best way to manage for forage loss is to phase in native plantings over a period of time so that only a manageable portion of your grass production is unavailable at any given time.
- Q: What about protecting existing native plant communities, particularly native prairies and savannas?**
- A:** Native grasslands are arguably the most threatened ecosystem in the United States, as are many of the wildlife species such as grassland birds that are dependent on them. Approximately 55 wildlife species that depend on native grasslands in the U.S. are either threatened or endangered with an additional 728 as candidates for listing. Protecting remaining native prairies is a top conservation priority.
- Q: Will using native plants automatically constitute any NRCS agricultural conservation practice being labeled a “wildlife” practice?**
- A:** No. The use of native plants alone does not constitute a practice being labeled a “wildlife” practice in terms of its primary purpose. Increased utilization of native plants benefits many natural resource concerns, one of which can be wildlife. In order to be labeled a “wildlife” practice, native grass plantings will need to be of sufficient size, plant composition and have appropriate management practices applied to positively benefit the target wildlife species.

A shift to a Natives First native vegetation standard has the potential to do more for wildlife on private agricultural lands than any other action at the federal level. USDA alone could have a greater net-positive impact for native wildlife through a policy change than perhaps any other federal or state agency. Such a policy is consistent with the goals of maintaining or improving soil, air and water quality, increasing recreational hunting and wildlife watching opportunities and providing high-quality summer forage and decreasing the risk associated with drought for livestock and forage producers.

**For more information about the Natives First Coalition,
visit www.bringbackbobwhites.org/conservation/natives-first.**

