Harvesting, Processing, and Seeding of Native Grasses in the Central and Northern Great Plains

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The increased demand for large amounts of grass seed in the Great Plains began in the 1930's. This demand arose largely from the pressing need for adapted grasses for seeding large acreages of previously cultivated cropland. From the very beginning, it became clear that many grasses then in trade channels, such as timothy, fescues, and orchard grass, were unsuited for seeding in the drier parts of this area. The requisite knowledge and suitable equipment for harvesting seed of native grasses were sadly lacking. Only here and there could one find a farmer or rancher who had attempted to harvest a limited acreage for local use. This paper endeavors to point out solutions to several problems that arose in perfecting techniques and adapting machinery to supply the growing demand for urgently needed seed, condition it for seeding, and devise or adapt seeding equipment to handle very small, fluffy, and trashy seed.

Suitability of Grass Stand for Harvest

In determining whether the seed crop of a field is worth harvesting, the seed collector must consider a number of things. The first question he must answer is this: Is there sufficient seed per acre to warrant the cost of harvesting? This is dependent on the number of seed heads present and the fill or set of the seeds. Among wheat-grasses, wildryes, needlegrasses, and bromes, which promise a good seed crop resemble a field of wheat. In the bluestems and switchgrass, the seed heads are fewer than wheat and the plants produce heavy leaf growth. Judging from appearance alone, however, is misleading; the collector must know the actual amount of seed present. To determine this, he examines the field for uniformity of seed-bearing heads and inspects typical seed heads for seed content. From a composite sample taken from representative spots in the field, he determines the proportion of filled seeds and weed seeds. Knowing the purity of the seed he is harvesting and the measured area covered...