

### A Private Nursery Perspective

There are several aspects of the July 1997 and January 1998 Editorials in *Forest Nursery Notes* on the role of government nurseries that deserve comment. My perspective is not derived from the anti-government sentiments mentioned in the first article. It is rather a matter of economics and unfair competition by governmental agencies with private native plant nurseries and ecological restoration companies. I am the President of Bitterroot Restoration Inc., an ecological restoration firm that provides comprehensive restoration services including the production of site specific, source-identified, native plants for sites throughout the Western United States, Alaska and Canada. We have been doing this for 12 years and I believe we are one of the pioneers in the propagation of native plants and in the field of ecological restoration. Currently we grow over 300 species of native plants with often 15-20 seedlots per species and we provide these in a wide range of sizes appropriate for restoration projects. We work with many federal agencies including the USDA Forest Service, state land management agencies and private companies.

In the July 1997 article, the proud past of public nurseries and their ability to produce inexpensive seedlings are cited as justifications for their continued existence. In the January 1998 article, the recent and continuing conversion of the J. Herbert Stone Nursery to a native plant nursery as a result of the decline in the need for reforestation seedlings is discussed. It is asserted that little is known about native plant propagation and that native plants are not widely available. Hence, the need for Forest Service nurseries to convert to native plant production as the need for reforestation seedlings declines.

I believe that these assertions are wrong and would like to note the following realities.

First, many private nurseries including ours are very advanced in terms of both native plant propagation and research. (Fig. 13). A great deal is known about native plant propagation. One need only look at the range of species and the quality of the plants that we and other nurseries offer. Propagation research by Forest Service Nurseries such as that cited in the editorial is mostly an exercise in reinventing the wheel. Secondly, there is a rapidly increasing, reliable supply, of source identified native plants. Thirdly, the Forest Service is not providing inexpensive seedlings but rather very expensive seedlings at a cheap price. Their pricing reflects only a portion of their costs and the balance is subsidized by the taxpayer. Private nurseries must reflect their real costs of production in their pricing. Therefore, true competition does not exist and the private company necessarily loses.



**Figure 13. Private nurseries are growing a variety of forest and conservation species, including native plants for riparian restoration projects.**

Finally, it is patently unfair for government to be competing directly with private industry. There is no more need or justification for government production of native plants than there is for government production of corn, lettuce, automobiles or steel.

All that we are asking for is a level playing field on which we can freely compete with other companies to produce the highest quality, source-identified seedlings at the lowest true price. Everything that governmental nurseries are now doing can and is being done by the private sector. Indeed, public nurseries have a proud past but the future is with private nursery production of native plants.



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