

Six Years of Progress in Increasing Native Grass Seed Supplies in South Carolina **Bill Stringer, Clemson University and SC Native Plant Society**

For the past six years, the SC Native Plant Society (SCNPS) and the US Forest Service (USFS) in South Carolina have collaborated on an innovative program to make locally adapted seeds of various native grasses and wildflowers available to the Forest Service for use in restoration projects in the Francis Marion/ Sumter Ranger Districts. From this collaboration has come a program unique in the US National Forest System that replaces exotic plant species with native species in restoration and soil erosion prevention programs in the Forests. This program originated from a conversation between an SCNPS leader and a USFS soil scientist while bumping down a Forest Service road edged with bahiagrass and sericea lespedeza, two invasive non-native species.

The Forest Service has provided the funding, and SCNPS has provided the expertise and volunteers to run an annual series of volunteer seed collection field trips. Along the way, hundreds of volunteers have learned to recognize native grass species, and how best to collect seeds. Hundreds of pounds of seed of native grasses and a few native wildflowers have been collected and turned over to the Forest Service.

At first, USFS used the seeds to generate seedling plugs to use in establishing small seed production fields. Forest Service personnel at the Seed Orchard in the Witherbee Ranger district in the Francis Marion NF worked out a very effective protocol for generating large numbers of seedling plugs. Volunteers from SCNPS have assisted in transplanting seedling plugs into small fields with the Forest districts. The seed fields have been in production for 1 to 4 years, and have proven to be very productive. As seed collection and seed production from planted fields have increased the seed supply, more of the seeds have been used to direct-seed disturbed soil areas in the Forests.

Recently a very important development has come out of these cooperative efforts. As a result of our identifying prolific natural seed production sites in the Forest districts, two identified germplasm collections have been developed and released by the USDA Plant Materials Center at Americus. One is "Newberry" indiangrass, collected from a site in Newberry County. The other is "Union" purpletop, from a site in Union County. Seed of these two collections will be made available to farmers in South Carolina for the purpose of producing large quantities of locally adapted native grass seeds for use by public and private landscape managers. This will lead to economically viable native seed production enterprises in South Carolina.

This innovative program by a Federal agency and a non-profit environmental group stands as a model approach to solving a difficult problem. Forest Service leaders in several other states contacted USFS in South Carolina for guidance in starting similar programs in their states. The South Carolina Native Plant Society can be justly proud of our part in bringing this about.