

SOILS

Niche market opportunities emerge for rye

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For decades, cereal rye (*Secale cereale*) has been used in the Southern Great Plains as winter pasture for livestock. Whether it is planted as a clean-tilled monoculture or overseeded into bermudagrass, this is still true today. However, there are three emerging niche uses for rye of which farmers in the region should be aware.

The biggest and most rapidly expanding niche market for rye is for cover crop planting. There are many reasons rye is a popular cover crop including wide range of adaptation, ease of establishment and allelopathy (its ability to prevent weeds). Between the years of 2007 and 2015, Oklahoma Foundation Seed Stocks increased its annual sales of the foundation class of rye seed from about 37,000 pounds per year to more than 200,000 pounds per year. Requests for rye seed during that period exceeded what was available in the last six of those years (Table 1). This illustrates that growth in demand has outpaced growth in supply. The cover crop industry is hungry for rye seed, and we still need to provide seed for grazing acres in the Southern Great Plains.

Table 1. Annual pounds of foundation class rye seed requested from and sold by Oklahoma Foundation Seed Stocks. Data courtesy of Jeff Wright at Oklahoma Foundation Seed Stocks.

Year	Pounds of Rye Ordered by Customers	Pounds of Rye Sold or Available
2007	37,895	37,895
2008	37,750	37,750
2009	42,500	42,500
2010	70,000	66,900
2011	105,000	48,000
2012	215,000	102,000
2013	300,000	230,000
2014	280,000	66,500
2015	300,000	211,000

The next niche market is whiskey. That's right, rye whiskey. In the early days of the United States, whiskey was made primarily from rye. By law set forth by George Washington, in order for a whiskey to be considered a "true American whiskey" it must contain at least 51 percent rye. Over time, tastes shifted to bourbon, which must contain at least 51 percent corn. Tastes

are shifting again, and there is a huge resurgence in rye whiskeys.

The third niche market is grain for bread making and baking. While this is a very small segment of the industry, it is growing. There is a portion of the population, inspired by a number of reasons, who want whole grain baked goods from freshly milled grains, including rye.



Elbon Rye

While production practices, expenses and yields are similar for wheat and rye, rye brings about \$3.50 to \$4 per bushel more when the grain is sold because of supply and demand economics. According to 2014-2015 National Agricultural Statistics Service and Foreign Agricultural Service data, the U.S. consumes about 400,000 metric tons of rye per year. Of that, approximately 183,000 metric tons are produced domestically and about 200,000 metric tons are imported.

In order to take advantage of these markets, producers need to know what cultivars are desired by the end user and what practices are needed to get the best production. The 46 Grain Company in Ames, Oklahoma, is working to answer these

questions. Some of their activities include evaluating rye cultivars in forage and grain production systems for adaptation in Oklahoma, partnering with the Noble Foundation on demonstration plots of our new small grains (one of which is Maton II rye), evaluating northern rye varieties like Musketeer and Rymin, and working with the Germany-based company KWS to evaluate hybrid rye. For more information about the work being done in Ames and some of these niche markets, contact J.D. Drennan at jddrennan@fortysixgrain.com. ■