

Roanoke, VA



Ohio-based company selling new grass crop to Virginia farmers

Some farmers glowing over prairie grasses

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Switch grass is planted at a farm in Campbell County on Wednesday morning. Switchgrass is a new way to help farmers produce hay and grass throughout the summer.

Most Virginia pastures thrive in the spring and fall, but turn brown in the summer because the grass can't take the heat.

However, an Ohio-based company is selling a new grass crop to some area farmers developed to flourish in the dog days of summer.

FDC Enterprises Grasslands Services markets a prairie grass mix for grazing, cutting hay or even for biofuels. The few farmers who are planting it in Campbell and Appomattox counties will be using it to feed animals, FDC president Fred Circle said.

Two of those farmers, Nina and Ron Reynolds, watched Wednesday morning as an FDC crew planted 11 acres of their Rustburg farm with the mix of switch grass, Indian grass and blue stem. While it will be about a year before the first harvest, the idea of the new field has given the Reynolds' hope they can sustain their llamas and goats on homegrown hay. It is something they were especially willing to try after last year's drought and regional hay shortage left many farmers scrambling for animal feed.

“This will give us our own hay and may give us a surplus so we can sell some,” Nina Reynolds said. “With last year’s weather, we had to do something.”

Fescues and orchard grasses go dormant in the heat of the summer and “farmers need something in that time period,” Circle said. Prairie grasses are better suited because they have more protein and “the hotter and drier it gets, the better they do.”

Ron Reynolds said he grew up around prairie grass in North Dakota, but didn’t know much about its use on Campbell County farms until he attended an education session a year and a half ago. He took the plunge to plant a portion of his pastures, he said, because he needed to replant the field.

The contract, which includes a guarantee that the company will replant if the seed doesn’t take or isn’t ready to harvest within a year, cost about \$2,500. The price, Reynolds said, is less than the cost of planting and fertilizing fescue or orchard grass - common cool-season grasses grown throughout the East Coast.

The Reynolds’ watched early Wednesday as two large tractors with 12-foot-wide planting drills crisscrossed the pasture, each slicing numerous small cuts into the land, laying down seeds, covering them up and then spraying a fine mist of herbicide on the existing vegetation.

That herbicide is critical to the planting technology because it allows the new grass seed to grow without sun or water competition, said crew chief Chris Stiles.

In just a few short weeks, depending on the weather, the grass will sprout and shortly after, it will establish well enough that a super-hot summer won’t hurt it, Stiles said. By the end of the season, it should be knee-high.

Stiles and his crew - one of four in the company - planted their way through the Midwest, finally arriving in Virginia late last week. Their work was significantly delayed because of rain and flooding in the Midwest, along with the occasional equipment failure. So far, in its second year planting in Virginia, the company has sowed more than 500 acres with grass mix, Stiles said.

After the Reynolds’ pastures were planted, the crew drove to Appomattox to plant three acres and then were scheduled to head to Powhatan.

It will take about a year for the pasture to be ready for grazing and the Reynolds’ will have to make sure their animals don’t chew the grass to the nub, as is common with cool-season grasses, Stiles said.

The FDC Enterprises foray into the grasslands business came when wildlife conservation groups worked to restore native prairie grasses while killing off invasive plants, he said. FDC developed a technology that combined planting with herbicides and the result was a new way to sow prairie grass seeds so they become mature fields in a fraction of the time old methods took.

Mature fields of the warm-season grasses are wildlife magnets for insects, birds and deer, Circle said. “The only animals that don’t really use it are coyotes and foxes and if you have a good thick stand, raccoons won’t go in it either.”

But the cash crop is feeding cattle. Since 2002, the company has planted 86,000 acres in 15 states with the pasture and cattle grazing market growing the fastest.

The grasses, which are native to North America prairies, evolved in hot dry conditions with bad soil and no fertilizers. “Prairie grasses are not hybridized or scientifically engineered,” Circle said. “They’ve just propagated over time. They never got any fertilizer other than what came out of the back end of the bison, so they have evolved in the worst conditions.”