

Growing Grass in New Mexico

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A sod farm flourishes amid strict water limitations

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STONEGATE TURFGRASS RANCH.



Sod is harvested with a Brouwer harvester.

Water is important to growing grass anywhere, and nowhere does it carry more significance than in the Southwest. It's impossible to talk about growing grass in New Mexico without water issues entering the conversation. New Mexico water rights are controlled by the state with strict limitations on transfers. Intense coverage of water issues doesn't help sell sod, but Stonegate Turfgrass Ranch in Morarity, N.M., has existed for 42 years on the high desert east of Albuquerque. The current combination of escalating operational costs and falling sod prices dictates a strong focus on cost control to maintain a profitable operation.

Don Crismore purchased the 312-acre sod farm with 227 acres of water rights seven and a half years ago. While xeriscaping has gained popularity throughout the Southwest, green turfgrass continues to break up vast expanses

of desert brown. Crismore said, "Even though our city and state governments place harsh restrictions on water use, the bottom line is that homeowners want and demand sod for their front and backyards."

Crismore owns several businesses in New Mexico, and several years ago he decided to work less. "I told my wife and adult children I was going to work half-days, but I would choose the 12 hours I wanted to work," he said. "I always had one of the best kept yards in my neighborhood, so I thought that a sod farm would be a natural for my free time," he said. "Boy, was I wrong!"

Crismore purchased Stonegate from its original owner who raised about 800 sheep on the sod. Image is high on Crismore's list of priorities for the sod farm, and Stonegate presents an inviting appearance even to travelers passing by on nearby Interstate 40.

Water issues

With only about 8 inches of annual rainfall, irrigation is essential for all farming operations on the high desert. Stonegate's irrigation water is provided by two 8-inch wells that together pump 2,500 gallons per minute. During the spring and summer months, wells operate 20 to 22 hours a day. Costs for running the pumps represent a major production outlay of around \$60,000 annually, and a five-year rate request was recently granted to the local co-op.

"We water through hose-fed lateral pivots, side rolls and hard set irrigation systems. We're the only farm in our valley to use lateral pivots," Crismore said.

"The circle pivots are more popular and about 50 percent less expensive when purchased. However, we cover almost 100 percent of irrigated acreage with the lateral pivots. The shape and layout of our farm lends itself to the lateral pivot concept. We achieve a professional appearance with minimal weeded areas. We also get 15 percent more available sod, so we can theoretically pay the extra cost with the second harvest. Our local dealer for Zimmatic systems is Eastview, Estancia, N.M., owned by John Aday. John has been extremely helpful and is always available day or night. We just had a lateral collapse, and John was out here at night."

With water rights strictly controlled, farming expansion requires the purchase of water rights from an existing holder or the purchase of a farm that includes water rights. Water rights cannot be transferred from one aquifer to another, but water may be piped from an aquifer located on a farm where rights are held to another farm.

Growing sod

Crismore grows bluegrass and a bluegrass/fescue/rye mix. "In April of this year, we took a big step to experiment with a salt-tolerant, tall fescue/bluegrass mix and were extremely pleased with results," he said. "We didn't net it as we were told that netting would not be necessary, but just to make sure, we did net another field that we just planted in August. The

fields looked so good that we cut out some rolls at three months, and it didn't hold together very well without the netting. We've planted only seed from Scott's, and we've been extremely pleased with the results. We are trying another seed in a small field just to compare."

New Mexico soil typically has very little organic matter, and adding amendments is the norm. "Our soil is deficient in almost every way," Crismore said. "Our biggest problem is salt, as a 50 to 60-mile-long wall of salt lies just 3 miles east of our farm. We fight salt with applications of gypsum, which helps. We apply dairy manure and have used humates. We are trying to get away from granular fertilizers by substituting liquid soil enhancers."



A strong root system produces dense turf.

Stonegate uses Brouwer rotary mowers and Brouwer harvesters. Sod is mowed weekly with the 22-foot rotary mowers at heights of 2.5 to 3 inches with mowing sometimes increased to twice weekly in harvesting areas. "We harvest in 7-square-foot rolls, and on request we will cut 5-square-foot rolls," Crismore said. Jumbo rolls up to 350 square feet are also cut. Stonegate employees include a farm manager, with six full-time employees and one part-time employee.

Four semi tractor-trailers and one straight truck are maintained by Stonegate that carry eight pallets of sod. Most sod is delivered on Stonegate trucks.

"We don't encourage farm pickup, but some customers prefer to pick up sod at our farm and receive a reduced price," Crismore said.

Marketing sod

Stonegate markets both wholesale and retail, and retail currently accounts for about 70 percent of sales. "Our wholesale customers are increasing steadily as more become aware of our quality product," Crismore said. Maintaining good relations within the sod industry is important. "We have only one other sod farm in our area, and it is a reputable competitor. We send customers there when we aren't able to provide a requested variety." Stonegate does not install sod, which Crismore believes would undermine the

relationship with wholesale customers. "When we receive an installation request, we suggest one of our contractors," he said.



The Stonegate Turfgrass Ranch entrance.



Lateral pivot irrigation increases available turfgrass by about 15 percent over center pivot.

Stonegate's largest market is Albuquerque where Stonegate operates a retail sales lot. Sod is delivered to every city within New Mexico except Las Cruces, near the southern border of the state, which has an area sod farm. "Some cities on our eastern border with Texas can purchase sod from a sod farm in Amarillo, Texas, at a reduced trucking cost," Crismore said. "We encourage this practice, but many customers prefer doing business with us."

The combination of increasing costs and a reduction in sod sales dictate careful cost-control measures. "We haven't been hurt as badly with the housing industry in a slump as some sod farmers are experiencing in other parts of the country," Crismore said. "Of course, the housing industry plays a large role in the survival of the industry, but politicians have convinced homeowners that we are running out of water. Laws have been passed that restrict sod to only 20 percent of front yards. Sod sales continue to dwindle as xeriscaped yards, or just dirt and weeds, flourish."

An increased advertising budget for both print and Internet has helped increase sales. "We are forced to work with a smaller workforce, reduce fertilizer applications, allow regrowth to occur rather than reseed, build our own pallets and increase delivery costs," he said.

Crismore noted that increasing costs and falling sod prices are taking a toll on sod farmers. He expects that many sod farms will stop producing sod and

turn to other, more profitable crops.

Nancy Riggs is a freelance writer and has been covering the green industry for *Turf* for almost 20 years. She resides in Mt. Zion, Ill.