

GS-SI-80

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
777 E. Rialto Avenue
San Bernardino, CA 92415-0730

A LOOK AT THE SOD PRODUCTION ENTERPRISE IN CALIFORNIA

by
John Van Dam, Farm Advisor
San Bernardino County
July 1980

UC Cooperative Extension

A LOOK AT THE SOD PRODUCTION ENTERPRISE IN CALIFORNIA

by
John Van Dam, Farm Advisor
San Bernardino County
July 1980

Introduction

An expanding segment of the agricultural industry is the turfgrass producer group. Their growth in size and number has continuously exceeded expectations. It appears to be a dynamic business with mounting interest from venture capital seeking new areas for investment. The data accumulated through interviews with representatives of local producers reveal a merging sector that is highly technical, complex, and capital demanding. It is definitely not for the light-hearted lacking agricultural skills or adequate finances. Land, water, capital and management in abundance are prime essentials.

Basics

Market determination and documentation are the base from which projected sales, budget formulation and acreage determination stem. Some success has been reported on 40- to 50-acre operations. However, these function solely as specialty producers. They usually operate as a two-man facility with a five-year land lease. They have no distribution system and primarily serve the small-lot purchasers.

The more firmly established enterprise with continuous product availability and reliable delivery system entails a minimum of one hundred plus acres laid out in 20-acre plots. It is not a large farm, yet one considered to be of sufficient capacity to support the initial sod enterprise and sustain an ability to develop a growth potential.

Land ownership may easily include renting or leasing acreage. Outright land purchase and ownership are generally advisable when and where possible. Regardless of how the acreage is owned, the land must have a satisfactory water source in quantity and quality, be of a good soil type, fertile, and with a minimum of weeds. The land should be located in a climate conducive to good sod production.

Each 20-acre plot must be accurately measured in square feet for precise crop yield and cost determination. If new land is to be brought into production, the initial preparation is best done by custom contracting to minimize capital expenditures on a one-time operation. Another instance when custom contracting should be used is in land fumigation. Done by professionals, risks are reduced, less time is consumed, and the entire operation is usually less expensive. Following these operations, routine field production practices are then initiated. The basic necessities with regard to equipment and personnel include the following.

TABLE 1

Personnel

- 1 mechanic
- 2 irrigators (one for each 50 acres)
- 1 salesperson
- 2 tractor drivers
- 1 truck driver
- 2 field workers (also assist in harvesting)
- 1 accountant
- 1 secretary

Equipment

\$ estimates
(in thousands)

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---|-------|
| 2 tractors | - one 50 horsepower and the other 30. Equipment includes turf tires, 3-point hitch with auxiliary hydraulic valve, quick-detach loader. | 30 |
| 1 mower | - large size (at least 16 ft.). Type and model varies with type grass being produced. | 25 |
| 1 seeder | - 8-10 ft., Brillion type. | 5 |
| 1 sweeper | - vacuum type. | 6 |
| 1 sprayer | - 300-gallon, mounted. | 2 |
| 1 spreader | - fertilizer, rotary. | 2 |
| 1 scraper | - area and roadway, 15 degree tilting blade. | 1 |
| 1 irrigation system | - pipe, joints, valves, wheel-line, booster pumps, etc. Match system with field sizes, know pressure water schedules. Recommendation is to contact reliable, experienced irrigation firm. | 70 |
| 1 harvester | - less expensive if adequate labor is available. | 35-60 |
| 1 distribution system | - one 18-wheel, 3-axle tractor; one 45-ft. bed trailer. A large system is needed immediately to avoid later costly breakdowns due to too small trucking equipment. The 45-ft. bed recommended to allow space for hauling the fork-lift. | 90 |

1 forklift	- small, compact, mounts trailer bed.	5
2 pickups	- small, Courier type.	10
1 motorbike	- 3-wheeled for irrigators.	4
1 shop	- 700 square feet.	10
1 shed	- storage for seed, fertilizer, netting, etc.	10
1 netting layer		2-3
1 automobile	- sales car	8
1 office building	- 30' x 40' with office equipment and furniture.	15

Production

Three crops in a two-year period is considered a good production record in California. The first planting is usually in the fall. This takes advantage of fall rains and has a crop ready for marketing the following spring. The planting date assigned to the crop is that date when the field is first irrigated. By this time 20 percent of the total direct production costs has been invested into the crop. The sod crop should be well established by November so that the rains will not wash it out. Production should now move along rapidly so that it can be prepared for April sales. A salesman should be employed by February, and promotional material, literature and contracts prepared.

As production of the first 20 acres gets underway, the next 20 are started, and 20 more every 30 days thereafter, weather permitting. In that way production fields follow each other and have marketable grass continuously available.

A Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass mix is generally used. Usually the Kentucky bluegrass makes up 85 percent of the mix on a seed weight basis; the perennial ryegrass accounts for the remaining 15 percent. Ryegrass is a poor shipper, but is included in the mix to mask the susceptibility of bluegrass to Fusarium roseum disease. In addition to the bluegrass and ryegrass mix, there is in California a limited production of hybrid bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, zoysiagrass and dichondra.

As the fields are producing their crop, management's attention must focus on marketing procedures, terms of sales, credit lines, and similar necessities toward the establishment of a selling base. The consequences of slack attention to these matters can have as serious effect on the success of

the sod enterprise as any lack of attention to the production operations. Combined, the production and sales are the life-blood of the company and together reap success or failure. Costs and returns were not discussed, as few of those interviewed had such figures available.

So--to return to the question of whether to enter the sod production business--it remains a determination of available resources, personal ability and desire. It sure isn't for everyone, and even for those adventurous few who feel that it is, there are numerous headaches, but also some rewards.

cv/35c