



DATE: May 4, 2026

MEMO TO: Sara Knizhnik, Chair
Operations Committee

FROM: Pati Vitt
Director of Natural Resources

REQUEST: Provide policy direction regarding vendor requests to retain established plants as founder stock for native seed production after contract completion.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS SUPPORTED: Leadership, Conservation, Organizational Sustainability

FINANCIAL DATA: There is no financial impact at this time.

BACKGROUND: Native seed is essential to successful ecological restoration and land management. Native plants are finely tuned to local soil and climate conditions, providing the foundation for healthy ecological relationships that support pollinators, birds, and wildlife. Using regionally adapted native seeds ensures ecosystems recover with improved ecological function, significantly higher plant diversity, and better long-term sustainability.

The demand for native seed significantly exceeds available supply — a challenge documented at both global and regional scales. In response to this critical gap, a coalition of Midwest restoration and land management organizations established the Midwest Native Seed Network (the “Network”), which the District has joined. A large-scale survey of Network participants revealed that more than 500 native Midwestern species are effectively unavailable for restoration purposes. In some instances, commercial production of these species does not exist. In others, seed is available but becomes cost-prohibitive at the scale of large restoration projects. Even modest “per-packet” prices present substantial barriers when restoration projects require thousands of pounds of material.

The District's recent seed procurement process directly illustrates this challenge. Despite awarding \$2.7 million in contracts, the process identified that 39 species are entirely unavailable in the commercial market, and 64 species were bid in excess of \$500 per pound. Among species that were both available and competitively priced, 17 could not be supplied in the quantities requested, resulting in a total shortfall of 709 pounds—the approximate market value of the shortfall is \$833,235. This shortage of native seed impedes the District’s habitat restoration efforts and limits its capacity to improve ecosystem services. Strategic partnerships that increase native seed production capacity are critical to meeting the District’s restoration goals.

The District routinely seeks competitive bids from native seed vendors who will sell native seed to the District. To cover the current shortfall, District staff has explored contracting with vendors to establish production fields using plant materials provided by the District, from which the vendors would cultivate plants (“founder stock”), harvest seed from the founder stock to meet

specified quantity and species requirements, and deliver that harvested seed to the District for its restoration projects. In conversations regarding this process, multiple prospective vendors have asked whether, under such contracts, they would be allowed to maintain founder stock in established production fields for continued seed production beyond the term of the District's contract. In that circumstance, seed produced by the founder stock after the District's contract term could be used or sold by the vendor for other, non-District purposes. In similar contexts, such as contracts for growing trees and plugs, the District has not allowed vendors to continue production from District plant materials for other purposes because the contract documents did not clearly permit such uses.

Staff recommends that the District consider modifying its standard contract documents for native seed production projects to expressly allow vendors to maintain founder stock in production fields after the District's contract term expires. Doing so would help to expand seed availability and extend the benefit of the District's restoration efforts by:

- **Expanding Production Capacity:** Contractors maintaining founder stock can continue producing additional seed after meeting the District's contract requirements, increasing regional seed availability.
- **Increasing Cost Efficiency:** Eliminating the need to re-establish production fields for each contract reduces costs for both parties and accelerates production timelines. This may enable the District to obtain more favorable unit pricing for seed production because of the value to vendors in retaining founder stock.
- **Ensuring Genetic Diversity:** Maintaining diverse founder populations supports the genetic resilience critical for climate adaptation and ecosystem health.
- **Supporting the Development of a Regional Seed Network:** Experienced contractors with established stock can help alleviate the national native seed shortage, benefiting the broader restoration community.
- **Increasing Quality Assurance:** Contractors invested in long-term production develop expertise with specific species, improving seed quality and germination rates over time.

Staff seeks policy direction to allow native seed vendors to retain established plants as founder stock after fulfilling all District contract specifications, and to explore other opportunities for establishing native seed production fields with collaborators, such as other forest preserve districts or conservation organizations.

REVIEW BY OTHERS: Executive Director, Chief Operations Officer, Director of Finance, Manager of Board Operations, Corporate Counsel.