

Economic assessment: 2004 Methyl bromide alternatives update

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Since economic assessment of the alternatives for methyl bromide use is a cross-cutting objective in the project, one of the first actions was to set up coordination meetings with each of the scientists involved with the physical experiments and other project participants. Results from these meetings established the best way to collect data was to first gather economic information based on current grower practices to develop a baseline enterprise budget. This budget can then also serve as input to the CUE process and a budget tool for individual growers. Subsequently the annual field experiments that will be carried out in the methyl bromide alternatives research can be compared both to the annual test control and the base enterprise budget. Therefore, a fundamental assumption (confirmed by the field researchers) is that the research will follow conventional production techniques other than those adjusted for the project treatments.

To collect baseline data separate surveys were drafted for 1) herbaceous perennials and 2) conifer seedlings and pre-tested with selected growers. In cooperation with Tom Dudek, results from the pre-test were used to refine the surveys and also to develop two different strategies for data gathering, one for conifer seedlings and another for perennial growers. It was decided that in the case of seedling growers the economic information would be collected across the production season by means of a check-sheet of activities designed for that purpose. Alternatively, the information corresponding to perennial growers would be collected in personal interviews. The final version of the data collection instruments was sent to the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) for approval, which was granted.

The conifer survey is divided in three parts. The first part is designed to collect general information about the operation, and this section was returned by mail. The second part of the survey is designed to collect information regarding current activities and inputs for conifer seedling production, and should be filled out monthly over the growing season. Data for this part of the form should be collected from a parcel selected for this purpose. Part III of the survey is a form to be filled out one time once harvest records from the selected parcel are available. Data collection for conifer growers has already begun, 21 surveys were sent by mail. To-date 9 growers have responded sending back the first part of the survey, which, as it was mentioned above, addresses general information about their production. Some preliminary results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Preliminary results based on part I of the conifer seedling survey ¹

Variable	Units	Average	Min	Max	Total
Labor Rates:					
Supervisor	\$/hour	19.6	15.0	30.0	n/a
Skilled Labor	\$/hour	12.8	8.0	15.0	n/a
Seasonal Labor	\$/hour	8.2	6.0	10.0	n/a
Production Acreage:					
White Pine	acre	1.2	0.5	3.0	9.5
Fraser Fir	acre	2.6	0.1	6.0	15.6
Total Seedling Acres	acre	22.4	5.0	40.0	179.0

¹ These figures are subject to change as more data is collected.

These preliminary results were presented on September 17, 2004, at the annual meeting of the Michigan Seedling Growers Association. This opportunity was also useful to show the scope of the study and to motivate other growers to take part of the study. Participants had suggestions for alternative data collection methods (particularly for Part II of the survey) and as a result an ad hoc committee was established to facilitate data collection and improve the participation of the growers. The first meeting with this committee has been scheduled for early February 2005.

In the case of perennial growers the survey to be used is ready and growers will be contacted during winter/early spring 2005 to set up personal interviews. Approximately 15 growers have been identified as potential participants.

During 2004 progress was also achieved on project objective 1b, designed to assess plug-based production systems as an alternative to field production. A form to collect the information was designed and discussed with a large Michigan grower that uses this system. Since plug-based production is relatively rare, other farms that use this production system outside Michigan are being identified in cooperation with Rob Richardson. If revisions to the UCRIHS application are approved, we anticipate a series of interviews to be conducted with these farms during 2005.

A series of coordination meetings with the scientists in charge of the field research are anticipated during the first weeks of January 2005. The goal is to begin incorporating the economic information with the technical information gathered from the 2004 experiments.