

SoDak Labs

South Dakota-based company provides winter growout services in Puerto Rico



SoDak Labs offers winter growout services for customers, growing corn in the southern region of Puerto Rico near Juana Diaz and Santa Isabel. (Chris Lusvardi photos)



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Key Personnel

- Tim Gutormson, seed physiologist and CEO
- Les North, winter growouts manager
- Al Bortnem, seed sizing services manager
- Kalyn Brix, genetics lab manager
- Laura Carlson, evaluation lab manager
- Christy Sternhagen, test distribution and planting manager
- Marissa Willert, customer service manager
- Denise Hall, receiving and human resources

Winter Growouts

- Two or three entries of two 62 seed replicates per seed size are treated and packaged.
- Growouts are planted in November, providing 62-70 days of growth prior to evaluation.
- Crops receive trickle irrigation, weed and insect control.
- Readings are done in January/February.
- Hybrid purity, fertility, and inbred evaluations are available. Root samples can be collected to evaluate selfs of offtype plants to isozyme pattern from hybrid inbreds in the lab.

SoDak Labs Winter Growouts Manager Les North has spent over 25 years reading winter growouts.

He's done so in places such as Argentina, Hawaii, Florida, and Puerto Rico.

In that time, North has found Puerto Rico to be one of the best places for growing corn.

"We've got easy access to Puerto Rico," said North in early January while working in fields in the southern region of Puerto Rico near Juana Diaz and Santa Isabel. "Growing degree units are faster here than other places."

A New Venture

North has spent the past three years reading growouts for SoDak Labs, which is based in Brookings, SD.

Offering winter growout services in Puerto Rico was a new addition to SoDak Labs' business model in 2018.

The company provides seed testing services which include sheller sizing/shakeout service, seed quality, trait, and hybrid purity testing.

SoDak worked in cooperation with Mayer SeedLine, Willmar, MN, during a three-year transition period prior to 2018, during which they prepared and packaged growouts.

"This transition was a logical bolt-on business to the SoDak seed services,"

"We've got easy access to Puerto Rico. Growing conditions here are excellent. Everything grows here because it is such a perfect environment."

*Les North
Winter Growouts Manager
SoDak Labs*

says Tim Gutormson, seed physiologist and CEO.

North works on site alongside SoDak Seed Sizing Services Manager Al Bortnem reading the winter growouts in Puerto Rico. Genetics Lab Manager Kalyn Brix and others also assist in the peak week. ▶



Les North, SoDak Labs winter growouts manager, records data in a corn field while working in January in Puerto Rico.



Corn planted in November provided 62-70 days of growth before SoDak Labs Winter Growouts Manager Les North arrived in January for evaluation of the crops.

Planting Crops

SoDak coordinates with farm managers in Puerto Rico to plant corn based on customer specifications and then to manage the crops throughout the growing season.

The coordinates of each growout is recorded for easy location while in the field, North explains.

"We put it all together in a sequence and arrange it in the fields for them to plant," he says.

Then, based on the planting date, North and Bortnem will fly to Puerto Rico to begin readings on the crops.

North is usually there between Christmas and New Year's. This year, Bortnem arrived a couple weeks later in mid-January.

"The planting date sets everything in motion," North says. "Everything becomes so accurate based on that. We start our calendar based on planting date."

The crops North was collecting data on in January were planted in November, which provides 62-70 days of growth prior to evaluation.

After planting, crops receive trickle irrigation, weed, and insect control.

Collecting Data

While on site in Puerto Rico, North and Bortnem collect as much information about the crops as needed.

They record the data and send it back to the lab in South Dakota, where it is processed and prepared to be sent out to customers. They'll send pictures to the lab if something looks amiss and record anything out of the ordinary, North notes.

"We have a pretty good idea of how the crops are growing," North says.

Information that is reported includes apparent selfs and outcrosses, North says. He adds outcrosses are described and rechecked after five to six additional days.

"Open communication back and forth is a key," North says. "We're set up for them to look at issues and see what's happening. We're thinking about

how the crops would look in a farmers' field and trying to answer the questions they're asking."

The growouts include two or three entries of two 62 seed replicates per seed size that are treated and packaged. Hybrid purity, fertility, and inbred evaluations are all available.

In addition, a new service of plant sampling of "apparent self or off type" plants and submitting for isozyme testing confirmation is offered.

The value of the results come as hybrids with concerns are evaluated and random outcrosses and selfs can be identified. Inbreds and sterile/fertile can also be evaluated.

Data collection. SoDak Labs is in the second year of the process of updating to in-field tablets, North points out.

"It's working better every year," he says.

They want to be able to record everything on the device, making communicating with the lab in South Dakota easier.

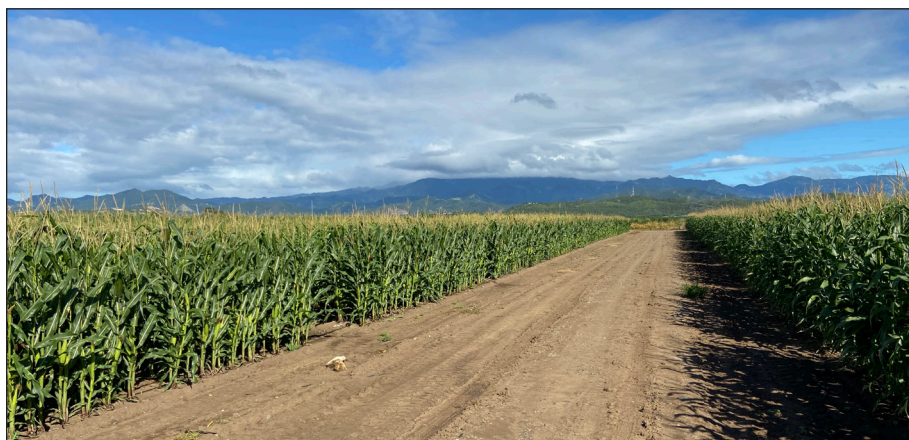
Crop growth. Compared to other places he's seen, North says insect pressure is, for the most part, under control in Puerto Rico, but it can be an issue at times.

"Quality seed is always at the mercy of bugs," North says.

Unlike other places where unpredictable weather conditions might hinder a plant's ability to grow once it's in the ground, North says they don't need to worry about crops not growing in Puerto Rico.

"Everything grows here because it is such a perfect environment," he says.

Chris Lusvardi, editor



Data from the SoDak Labs winter growouts in Puerto Rico is recorded and processed to provide information about crop growth for customers. (Chris Lusvardi photos)