Farmers Awarded Switchgrass Contracts For Tennessee Biofuels

KNOXVILLE, TENN.

Seventeen area farmers received acceptance letters into the University of Tennessee switchgrass farmer incentive program in February. In total, 725 acres located in seven different East Tennessee counties were enrolled in the program.

The switchgrass, along with wood chips and other plant material, will be used as feedstock in the state's first demonstration-scale cellulosic ethanol biorefinery. The biorefinery, which will be built as part of the University of Tennessee Biofuels Initiative, will be about one-tenth the expected size of a commercial biorefinery, producing around 5 million gallons of cellulosic ethanol annually.

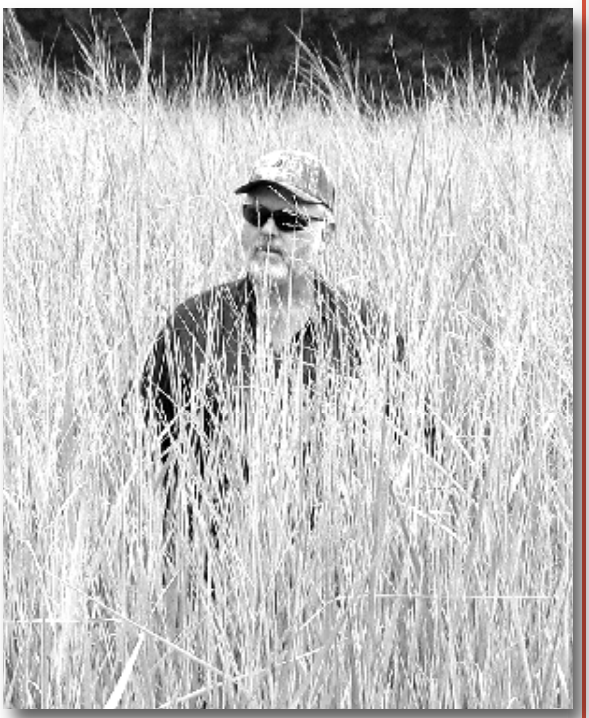
"We are very excited by the interest and eagerness to participate that we've seen from Tennessee farmers," said Dr. Kelly Tiller, director of External Operations for the Initiative. "We look forward to working closely with them over the next few years as we continue to establish switchgrass as an ideal energy crop for the state."

The farmer incentive program, which is coordinated through UT's Office of Bioenergy Programs, will pay farmers a rate of $450 per acre per year to grow switchgrass for a three-year term. The farmers will also be supplied with high quality switchgrass seed and technical assistance from UT Extension.

In addition to the national security and environmental benefits that are associated with renewable domestic energy production, UT anticipates that the Biofuels Initiative will also benefit farmers and rural communities.

"Switchgrass is a hardy, drought resistant plant that can grow in a variety of soils," said Tiller. "Our expectation is that it will open up new markets for farmers since it can grow on marginal land that may be unsuitable for other crops."

Cellulosic ethanol made from plants like switchgrass has been championed by the state as a viable, renewable and sustainable fuel source. Using switchgrass as a source for production of second generation biofuels holds several advantages over traditional first generation corn ethanol, since it is not a food or feed crop, is a native perennial grass that requires little use of fertilizers or other agri-chemicals, has conservation benefits for the land, and is not very management intensive once it is established.



Dr. Blake Brown, director of the UT Research and Education Center at Milan, demonstrates the vigor of switchgrass during the 2007 drought. This field rebounded from the famous Easter Freeze. At harvest it was more than 10 feet tall.

In addition to the 725 acres of switchgrass that will be planted this spring, UT expects to enroll more acreage into the farmer incentive program for planting in spring 2009 and 2010. Farmers who are interested in participating in future incentive programs are encouraged to contact their local Extension agent or visit the Office of Bioenergy Programs Web site at www.UTbioenergy.org. Δ