

New Ethanol Source

Miscanthus Under Study As Alternative Fuel Source

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An alternative plant for energy, miscanthus, was highlighted at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center during its Center Wide Field Day recently.

Steve Ebelhar, agronomist at the Dixon Springs Ag Center, discussed the crop in an interview during the field day.

"Miscanthus is a crop that is a warm season grass that came out of Europe, what they call

imum production which is upwards of 15 to 16 tons per acre. It's a very good crop for southern Illinois because of our longer growing season here and hotter temperatures. The grass just seems to do a lot better here."

There has not been any transformation from the crop to ethanol yet as researchers are only in the second year of trying to make that transition. Several researchers on campus now are devoting their efforts towards developing ethanol from this crop, however, the transition is still probably two to three years away from



Visiting during a break in the program are, from left, Murray Schuchardt of the forestry department at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center; Ronald Taylor, farmer; Steve Ebelhar, agronomist. Photo by John LaRose Jr.

elephant grass," he said. "A lot of oriental people have this in their gardens. It's like a reedy grass and it grows to be 8-12 feet tall in southern Illinois. It produces a lot of biomass for us. In Europe they use it to burn in their electrical power plants, but it doesn't burn as efficiently as coal. What we like about it is we think that based on the amount of biomass it produces, miscanthus may be a very good alternative for ethanol production. So as cellulosic ethanol technology becomes developed in the United States we think this is one crop that will allow farmers to grow a good deal of biomass on their farm and then sell it for ethanol production to replace the impact of using grain crops for ethanol production. That will take the pressure off grain crops."

At the field day, Frank Dohleman from the Department of Plant Biology at University of Illinois discussed the plant. Dohleman is a Ph.D student working on the project across the state to see how the crop grows. He also compared it to switchgrass, another biofuel that's being developed for ethanol production. So far, the research has progressed only to growing the crop.

"This is the fifth year of production at Dixon Springs, where we've had the demonstration type plot just to see how well it grows in Southern Illinois compared to Central and Northern Illinois," said Ebelhar. "After about two years it becomes established well. It starts out as a crown and then it spreads laterally through the soil. After two years we start getting near max-

producing a commercially available product.

There were three departments involved in the field day, Ebelhar said.

"We have a tour in crop sciences looking at insect management with stacked hybrids; plant pathology discussing fungicide use in crops; weed science talking about weed resistance occurring with Roundup Ready crops; we also have a fertilizer specialist here talking about dealing with these high fertilizer prices; and rounding off that program is the talk on miscanthus which is hopefully a future energy crop for southern Illinois farmers."

Another tour was horticulture which looked at organic apple production, blueberry production and strawberry production. A natural resources tour focused on pond management and proscribed burning of established woodlands. The other program was in animal science looking at beef production at the center. Ebelhar said he was pleased with the attendance.

"Attendance is good, so far we're up to about 180 and hoping to get over 200 which is about our norm," he said. The weather was nice and the temperature low.

"We have antique tractors here on display that farmers really like and the tractor owners like to come back and show them each year," he added. "So it's always a family type atmosphere here when we bring these people in and they start mingling with the farmers and the old timers that come back to share some of their stories with us." △



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