UK Switchgrass Study At A Crossroads

AUGUSTA, KY.

A four-year study with University of Kentucky College of Agriculture forage specialists exploring switchgrass as an alternative energy source is drawing to a close at the end of 2010. That leaves 20 Northeastern Kentucky producers involved with the project wondering where they go from here.

Each producer grew five acres of the warm-season native grass, used to produce "green" electricity. Despite two drought seasons during the study, producers managed to establish the crop. One of those growers, Bracken County farmer Tom Malone, says this may have been the best year yet for his crop. It yielded six to seven tons per acre despite a late-season drought.

"The proof lies here on the ground," said Malone after he harvested his crop of switchgrass. "It is very drought tolerant; it doesn't get affected as does a lot of other forages.

"Just as it has the past three years, East Kentucky Power Cooperative's Spurlock Station near Maysville will burn the switchgrass crop with coal to produce electricity. That may still be an option for producers if they continue to grow the crop on their own.

"The power companies are still debating what to do and how to go about it," Malone said. "We are taking a look at it here in (Bracken) county as a group, as a residential or light commercial direction to move in.

"Tom Keene, a UK forage specialist who worked with producers on the switchgrass project, said there is a market for switchgrass as a home-heating source as well as other options. He remains optimistic about the future of switchgrass in Kentucky.

"There is a market with home heating stoves to heat your greenhouses and shops," Keene said, "so there is some work being done on that. We think if we can just keep the momentum going and not have it die back, then we feel like we are on the right track.

"Keene says another two-year project is already under way, where producers are growing an additional 700 to 750 acres of switchgrass in Kentucky. With surrounding states under a mandate to use green energy it only enhances the future of switchgrass in Kentucky.

"I think the numbers begin to gel a little bit where it gives the farmer a chance to make some money, grow a green energy crop, do great things for the environment, clean up the air, great for wildlife, great for water and erosion control," Keene said. Δ

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