

FEATURE – TENNESSEE STUDIES SWITCHGRASS AS ETHANOL SOURCE

INTRO: Scientists in Tennessee are using U.S. Department of Agriculture funding to see if switchgrass can be a source of ethanol. USDA's Patrick O'Leary has the details. (1:31)

CORN MAY BE THE MAIN SOURCE OF BIOMASS FOR ETHANOL TODAY, BUT IF RESEARCHERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE CAN HELP IT, SWITCHGRASS MAY BE A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE IN THE FUTURE. WITH A U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE GRANT, THEY'RE STUDYING THIS PLENTIFUL, PERENNIAL PLANT.

Burt English, University of Tennessee: It is native to the United States. It grows in place for 10 to 15 years. Yield is about 10 tons per acre and that's without any genetic manipulation.

If you look at the total energy needs for this country, corn can probably fill 16 to maybe even 18 billion gallons of ethanol. But we need 86 billion gallons or more ethanol to come from renewable sources. And to meet that demand, we need at least two and a half times as much corn than we grow in this nation - just for ethanol.

ENGLISH SAYS SWITCHGRASS GROWS WELL IN THE SOUTH AND HAS A NUMBER OF ADVANTAGES.

English: You don't have to reseed it every year. You don't have to use the tractor planting cultivating. After two years, you probably don't have to use any chemicals on the plant. It's a low- input, low-fertilizer plant and you can use ordinary hay equipment to harvest it.

BUT DEVELOPING SWITCHGRASS AS A CASH CROP STILL INVOLVES SOME CHALLENGES. SCIENTISTS HERE ARE USING FUNDING FROM USDA'S COOPERATIVE STATE RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND EXTENSION SERVICE TO CONDUCT FIELD TRIALS.

English: We've been doing some weed experiments on switchgrass to see which herbicides would work when you have grass growing and competing with switchgrass. We need seed companies looking at this and we need plant improvement. We need yield increase. The more yield per acre, the more ethanol per acre. And I think that is going to be critical as we go down the road in the long run looking at the food versus fuel versus feed issue.

IN THE SHORT TERM, TENNESSEE IS PLANNING A FACILITY TO PRODUCE FIVE MILLION GALLONS OF ETHANOL FROM SWITCHGRASS AND FROM WOOD. FOR THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, I'M PAT O'LEARY.