

Flax may sprout life as biodiesel source

By BLAIR FANNIN

DURING the early 1950s, more than a quarter of a million acres of flax, an oilseed crop, could be found growing southward from Waco, Texas.

Grown primarily for the vegetable oil market, it may have new potential as a biodiesel crop as determined in part

Key Points

- Flax could be grown in Texas as a biodiesel source.
- Flax varieties with good cold tolerance are needed.
- Texas A&M is conducting flax research across the state.

through a Texas AgriLife Research field trial experiment.

Four varieties of flax pioneered by the agency formerly known as the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station during that era are part of a recently developed research trial funded by Chevron Energy Technology Ventures.

"It's kind of like we're coming full

circle," says Gaylon Morgan, small-grains researcher and member of the Texas A&M AgriLife project team. "Flax was grown on about 400,000 acres during that time, and Texas AgriLife Research had an active flax breeding program.

"Those varieties were known nationwide for having good cold tolerance. That's what we needed; a flax variety was something you could plant in the fall, survive the winter, avoid late freezes and produce seed in the spring. Now we're evaluating this as a possible biodiesel product or [one which] could be used in the vegetable oil industry."

Canola, rapeseed, winter-hardy safflower and camelina now can be found growing in the field trials near College Station, home of Texas A&M University.

"This project is funded by Chevron Technology Ventures, and there is another [camelina] trial funded by Targeted Growth International," Morgan notes.

Results from this trial and harvest of some spring types come first, Morgan says. Winter types are harvested afterward.

Some challenges

The project does have its challenges, such as stand establishment.

"Most of these crops have small seeds and must be planted very shallow compared to our traditional crops," Morgan says. "Therefore, good stand establishment is highly dependent on rainfall following planting. Some other things we are running into now are weed control problems. There are not a whole lot of herbicides labeled for these crops."

Harvesting has some challenges too. Seeds are small, and some varieties are worse about shattering and require timely harvest.

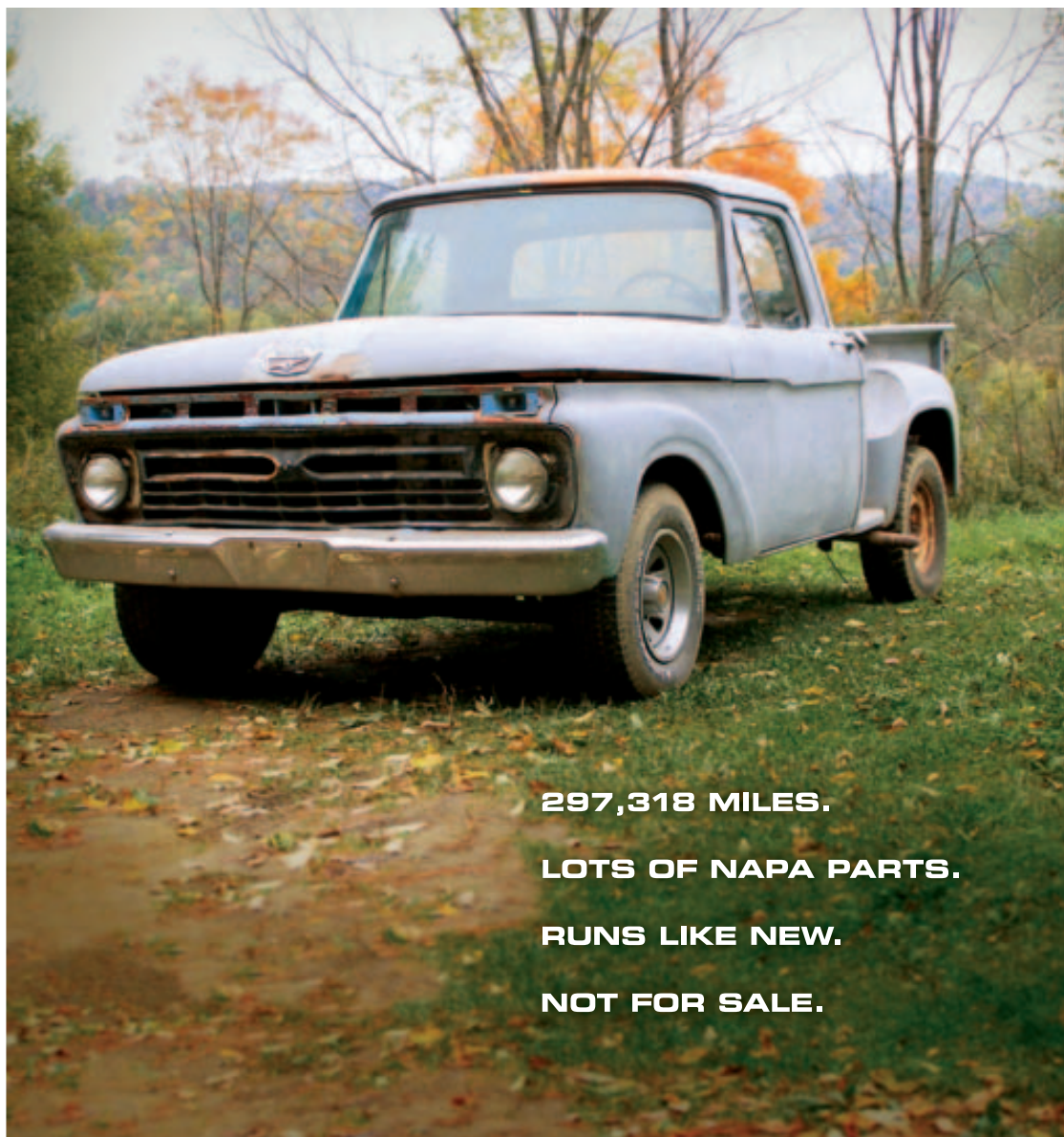
There are 51 entry trials at the College Station plot, and they have been repeated at nine locations across the state at different Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Centers.

"We're trying to get a good idea of where these species and varieties fit in specific growing regions of Texas," Morgan says.

The data collected on the different varieties will be used in determining which type of crop is best suited for either the biodiesel or vegetable oil industry, he adds.

"If it is biodiesel we're considering, we want the highest oil yield per acre," Morgan concludes. "The majority of the crops being evaluated have an oil content of about 40%. However, if some of these varieties have vegetable oil potential, then oil characteristics may be more important."

Fannin is with Texas AgriLife Communications, College Station.



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