

Making a switch in Tenn.

By CECIL H. YANCY JR.

THE tiny seeds Tony and Tim Brannon put in the ground the other day won't have an immediate impact, but the brothers are focused on the potential long-term possibilities.

The Puryear, Tenn., farmers planted 5 acres of switchgrass as part of Memphis Bioworks' 25Farmer Network. Other farmers in the Mid-South are planting sunflowers and sweet sorghum to assess the crops for use in the manufacture of biofuels.

Several years ago when former President George W. Bush mentioned switchgrass in his State of the Union address, the price of switchgrass seed shot up from \$6 to \$25 per pound.

"It's a good opportunity to be innovative and be part of the future," says Tony Brannon, who is also dean of the Murray State University School of Agriculture in Kentucky. "Switchgrass has the potential for a variety of uses." The Brannons were part of a switchgrass program that led to a pilot biofuels plant in east Tennessee.

The Tennessee Legislature appropriated \$600,000 through the state Department of Agriculture's Ag Enhancement program "to help mitigate the risks of pioneering biocrops," says Kyle Holmberg, the department's biofuels program coordinator.

The switchgrass seeds the Brannons planted were developed specifically for biomass production, says Frank Hardimon, director of sales for Blade Energy Crops. The company is part of Ceres, which is developing crops dedicated to energy production. Blade has



NEW INITIATIVE: Switchgrass is one alternative innovative farmers in the Mid-South are looking at this year. Proponents of the crop include: (from left) Frank Hardimon, Blade Energy Crops; Kyle Holmberg, Tennessee Department of Agriculture; Hillary Spain, Memphis Bioworks; Andy Holt, Weakley County, Tenn., farmer; and Tony and Tim Brannon, Puryear, Tenn., farmers.

Key Points

- West Tennessee growers are part of a group looking at alternative crops.
- Switchgrass presents potential for use in biofuels and forage.
- Switchgrass is a relatively low-input crop to produce.

developed two high-biomass varieties of switchgrass.

"This is the first year of dedicated energy crops in the field," Hardimon says. "It's kinda like the story of which came first, the chicken or the egg. In this case, it's the biomass." The next phase will be using the biomass from switchgrass to produce energy.

The Brannons have been growing switchgrass as part of a University of Tennessee pilot program for the past five years. They have harvested the biomass and sold it for use in a project with Alabama Power. They've also sold

seed from the crops and fed it as hay to their cattle.

Tony Brannon says the crop is relatively easy to grow. Just plant it and fertilize it. There are no diseases to contend with. He plants between 5 and 7 pounds of the tiny seed per acre. "It's very low maintenance," Brannon says. It only requires about 60 pounds of nitrogen per year. He has learned that it's best cut after frost. Then, the nutrients not used in production return to the soil. He's found that 6 to 7 tons of production per acre is realistic. Even in severe drought years, he's harvested 5 tons per acre. The crop also presents the possibility of carbon sequestration credits.

Andy Holt, a Weakley County, Tenn., farmer, sees the possibility of converting pastures to switchgrass production. "It's worked out real well. I'm always looking for some diversification to improve profitability per acre."

Blade Energy Crops incorporated

the expertise of innovative farmers in this grassroots project, Hardimon says. Switchgrass is a perennial that takes a couple of years to establish.

Switchgrass holds the possibility for biofuel production, says Hillary Spain, who coordinates the project for Memphis Bioworks.

Using alternative crops

"We're hopeful that these alternative crops will rise to the top and that farmers will incorporate them into their row-crop systems," Spain says. The Memphis Bioworks Foundation is a not-for-profit organization formed to lead the collaboration among public, private, academic and government entities to accelerate growth of the bio-science industry in the region.

Tony Brannon hopes the biofuel market develops for the crop. If it doesn't, he'll continue cutting switchgrass early and feeding it to his cattle. "It's as good as fescue," he says.

Livestock producers ID detrimental regulation

By PAM GOLDEN

IF USDA acts on industry concerns regarding the National Animal Identification System expressed at a listening session in Birmingham, Ala., in May, then NAIS will not be mandatory, will not be electronic and will be federally subsidized.

Some of those opposed offered comments that challenged the program but provided talking points. Some opposition was more strident. One woman promised to stand between federal officials who tried to force mandatory animal ID and the farm they planned to enter.

"The only solution is that this program is not in any way enacted and does not happen at all," said Alabama producer Paul Breckler.

Many speakers noted that such a program does not impact food safety,



but only offers quicker traceability. Others noted that the technology needed to implement the program effectively and efficiently doesn't exist, isn't conducive to commerce and is

vulnerable to privacy breaches.

"We want to make it very clear that animal ID is not a food safety tool," said Nathan Jaeger, field representative for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. "There are many firewalls and inspection procedures in place to keep our beef supply safe. The NAIS will not serve to enhance food safety, nor was it intended to. ... Animal ID does not prevent animal disease; it is merely a tool to respond to an animal health emergency."

That is why many speakers said money is better spent on the disease prevention programs that work effectively and efficiently.

"We recognize the effectiveness of time-proven, pre-existing permanent animal identification systems like hot branding, freeze branding, tattoos and metal tags," said Perry Mobley, beef and equine commodity divisions director

for the Alabama Farmers Federation, or ALFA. "We believe these methods of identification have been practical and useful as exemplified by the success of the Brucellosis Eradication Program."

That's why ALFA and other livestock organizations believe money is better spent on disease surveillance programs than on mandatory identification.

"We realized funding for disease surveillance programs like TB [tuberculosis], BSE [bovine spongiform encephalopathy, also known as mad cow disease], Johne's and other diseases has experienced massive cuts in the past few years," Mobley said. "The costs of adequately funding these programs would be minimal compared to the exorbitant costs of funding a mandatory animal identification program."