

## BiofuelsFuture

*St. Paul, Minn--*The federal government is banking on biofuels to play a key role in the nation's energy future.

Joan Glickman, outreach and infrastructure team lead for the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Biomass Program told participants at the Renewable Energy Roundtable gathering that a growing appetite for oil in the United States and abroad can be partially fed by alternative fuels.



"Biofuels have a tremendous role to play to meet our growing energy needs," Glickman told the over 100 people in attendance. "They're not a panacea, but they can play a very important role."

Glickman was a featured speaker at the Roundtable event held February 22 in St. Paul.

The DOE biomass program was established to develop and transform biomass resources into cost-competitive biofuels, bioproducts and biopower. That development will be necessary as new renewable fuel standards established in December of 2007 call for the use of renewable fuels to be expanded to 36 billion gallons by 2022. That includes the production of 16 billion gallons of cellulosic biofuels by that year. Long term goals call for biofuels to displace 30 percent of U.S. gasoline consumption by 2030.

The DOE has committed over \$200 million to six large cellulosic ethanol facilities, but will also have over \$100 million available to support smaller scale cellulosic biorefineries. Cellulosic conversion is a primary focus area of the program and is centering on the utilization of crop residue, perennial crops, forestry products and more.

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## A New Cord

Switchgrass has been touted for years as one of the top potential biomass resources for energy production and other applications because of its ability to grow nearly everywhere. But researchers from AURI, the University of Minnesota, Crookston and the Natural Resources Research Institute are taking a closer look at another grass with biomass potential.

While doing yield trials on switchgrass plots in northern Minnesota, a nearby stand of prairie cordgrass caught the eye of the scientists. The researchers received permission to harvest a portion of the field for yield data comparison. What they found has spurred interest in further investigation of the crop.



Switchgrass plots grown near Thief River Falls average 2.5 dry tons of biomass per acre while fields near Fertile averaged 4.8 dry tons. Meanwhile, the cordgrass plantation averaged 6.8 dry tons per acre.

"This wasn't a discovery of an unknown crop, but nonetheless the yields were impressive," says AURI scientist Ed Wene. "Now we need to find out if that was just a really good field, last year was a very good year or if we're onto something."

Prairie cordgrass is a native grass that can grow to a height of 6 to 8 feet. It's grown throughout the Northeast, the Great Lakes and the Midwest. It's typically found in poorly drained, wet soils, ditches, marshes, streams and potholes. Wene says it's not a suitable forage crop which may have limited interest in it to this point. But the impressive yields discovered in northern Minnesota is generating interest in giving it a closer look as a biomass crop that could one day be converted to ethanol or other biofuels.

"We can't say that it's the crop of the future because at this point all we can verify are yields from one field. But," Wene adds, "they are higher yields than we've seen from anything else in this area."

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## Future continued...

More than just developing cost effective alternative fuels, federal officials are also concerned with “looking at smart use of our resources,” Glickman says. She also iterated the need for balanced analysis, constructive dialog and smart policy when it comes to developing biofuels.

The Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy’s Biomass Program works with industry, academia and national laboratory partners on a balanced portfolio of research in biomass feedstocks and conversion technologies. Through research, development, and demonstration efforts geared at the development of integrated biorefineries, the Biomass Program works to transform the nation’s renewable and abundant biomass resources into cost competitive, high performance biofuels, bioproducts, and biopower.

The Renewable Energy Roundtable is a collaborative effort designed to develop partnerships and action plans to meet the immediate needs of the state and to move priority issues forward for the betterment of the entire state.



*About 100 people attended the February Renewable Energy Roundtable meeting at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Facilitated by AURI, the Roundtable is a multi-organizational working group established nearly 2 years ago to address impediments to renewable energy development in Minnesota.*



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