

A Census project to find Warm Season Grass

Three years ago group of producers, individuals, and some related businesses met at the urging of Penn State Extension to discuss how the market for warm season grass such as Switchgrass, Big Blue Stem and Indian Grass could be improved. The Association of Warm Season Grass Producers (AWSGP) was a result of that meeting.

The group has four primary objectives:

Promote the planting and use of warm-season grasses

Work to maximize the profitability of these crops for farmers

Assist in educating growers on the implementation of best practices for managing and harvesting these crops

Support and encourage entrepreneurial activities that further develops the use of warm-season grasses in all areas of agriculture

Initially, the group focused on warm season grass as fuel. Techniques were explored to densify the grass for a more efficient burn. They reviewed availability and efficiency of appliances used to burn the grasses. The gasses and chemicals produced during burning were examined. Warm season grass as fuel had many challenges and few advantages. The group changed direction. Warm season grass as animal bedding and conservation socks became the focus. Now instead of challenges they have advantages. The market grew. The demand increased and prices rose.

Warm season grass has appeal as both a conservation and a commercial crop. Conservation programs such as WHIP, EQIP and CREP have already enabled farmers to plant hundreds of acres of warm season grasses. Its perennial growth behavior and robust root system make it an excellent crop for controlling soil erosion, preventing nutrient runoff, and sequestering carbon. It is able to grown on marginal land and is managed with few inputs. High yields of this perennial crop (up to 5 tons/acre/year with no annual replanting required) makes it an attractive option for fiber markets. It has been used as a feedstock for bioenergy production, as forage material, and as a substitute for wheat straw and similar feedstocks in many applications, including livestock bedding, mulch, and landscape erosion prevention.

The demand for the crop currently exceeds the known supply. We know there is more out there, we just don't know where it is growing. As part of a SARE Partnership Grant the Association is conducting a survey to find where the grass is growing. We also want to know how many acres are planted and if the acreage is enrolled in any program such as CREP. We have buyers looking for material. We just need to know where the grass is growing.

The Association web site has a tool where producers can list their grass. We will also have members at the Keystone Farm Show in York surveying attendees about warm season grass. This list will then be passed to customers looking for material. There is no charge associated with the service. AWSGP just wants to maintain and build this rapidly expanding market. We have buyers. We need producers.

Author

Will Brandau is the Chairman of the Association of Warm Season Grass Producers. He operates a grass farm in Luzerne County Pennsylvania. He can be reached at willbrandau@gmail.com