

Changing the focus: Demand for switchgrass exceeds supply

BY WILL LANDAU

Chairman of the Association of Warm Season Grass Producers

When President George W. Bush mentioned switchgrass in his 2006 State of the Union Address as a viable alternate energy source a lot of folks and organizations jumped on the band wagon. Switchgrass was going to run our cars, heat our homes and schools and eliminate our dependency on foreign oil. Farmers started planting switchgrass to meet the anticipated demand.

Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) is a perennial plant. The name switchgrass is often used to include other warm season grasses such as Big Blue Stem and Indian Grass. All of these grasses require multiple growing seasons before they are at maximum production. A minimal harvest is possible after two years with full harvest potential after the third year. It is not unusual to achieve three or more tons of very dry material per acre upon maturity.

The crop is harvested in the fall after multiple hard frosts or in the early spring. It is cut and baled with typical haying equipment. Taking proper care, it can come out of the field with a moisture level less than 10%.

By 2009 there were thousands of mature acres of warm season grass and thousands of tons of harvested material for the energy market. The problem was, there was no energy market for the grass. Cellulose ethanol production was not economical. Densification to pellets or briquettes was difficult and

the final product could not compete with wood. Grass based fuel projects like the Benton Fuels for Schools project failed. It was dependent on densified switchgrass and that wasn't happening.

Then in 2016, with the help of Penn State Extension, the Association of Warm Season Grass Producers was formed. It had four primary objectives. Promote the planting and use of warm season grass. Work to maximize the profitability of these crops for local farmers.

Assist in educating growers on the implementation of best practices for managing and harvesting these crops. Support and encourage entrepreneurial activity that further develops the use of warm season grass in all areas of agriculture. Initially the group focused on grass energy.

The Association realized they needed a change of focus. They started looking at other marketing areas and techniques. The mushroom industry used straw but wouldn't change

to switchgrass. A few dairy farmers saw the value of switchgrass for bedding. However, not enough to make a difference.

It was discovered that switchgrass makes an excellent filler for silt socks. A silt sock is the long snake like thing used to control erosion on a construction site. Traditionally, the socks are filled with bark, saw dust or mulch. They are heavy and hard to move. As the traditional material decomposes it becomes alkaline.

A sock filled with switchgrass is light and easy to move.

Switchgrass is very absorbent but dries quickly. It does not decompose quickly. It does not harm the environment. The idea caught on quickly and multiple companies started buying switchgrass and making grass filled silt socks.

To meet the demand, the companies are even importing warm season grass material from a group of farmers in Ontario.

The Association has a list

of companies looking for Switchgrass.

If you have material to sell, please contact our group. More information about switchgrass, the emerging market and the Association can be found at www.awsgp.org or by con-

tacting the author:

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"...easy and quick, the one that works."
— Candice White

DOTTERER'S DAIRY, MILL HALL, PENNSYLVANIA
Dotterer Family: 3 generations and multiple family members, including (above l-r) Amanda Condo, accounting, Lori Butler, feed, and Candice White, dairy operations
1000 cows, 85 lbs/cow/day, SCC 100,000

"This stuff is phenomenal. After using other lotions that were inconsistent and inconvenient, we tried Udder Comfort™ spray 3 years ago. It's easy, we see results and continue to use it regularly on fresh cows starting lactation, especially heifers. It also softens hard quarters," says Candice White, part of the 3rd generation at Dotterer's Dairy, Mill Hall, Pa., managing the 1000-cow dairy averaging 85 lbs, 100,000 SCC.

Many members of the Dotterer families have important roles, including Candice Amanda and Lori (above), who take part in projects celebrating women in dairy to engage with other women about naturally healthy milk and dairy and the science and care in their roles with the cows, land and family business.
(<https://wp.me/pb1wH7-F>).

Candice appreciates the convenience of this cost-effective tool for managing comfort and quality. "When cows freshen, we spray udders after each of their first 8 milkings. The spray is easy and quick, so our milkers use it," she says. "We stick with Udder Comfort because it is the one that works."

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