



## The Birmingham News

### Switching to switchgrass better idea for gas tank

Electricity production not profitable, says Alabama farmer

Sunday, June 18, 2006

**MIKE CASON**  
News staff writer

WINTERBORO - David Wilson says his venture into switchgrass farming hasn't lived up to his expectations, but he still thinks there is a future in raising crops in Alabama as renewable energy sources.

Eight years ago, Wilson sold his cattle and planted switchgrass on about 190 acres under a project with Southern Research Institute, Alabama Power Co., Auburn University and others, funded partly by a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy.

The switchgrass was harvested, ground and mixed with coal that is burned to produce electricity at Alabama Power's Gadsden Steam Plant. The goals were to reduce pollution and develop a new cash crop for Alabama farmers. Switchgrass is a hearty prairie grass that grows easily on marginal farmland.

Although the blend of coal and switchgrass burned successfully with lower emissions, the project has not created a new market for farmers. It's cheaper to burn only coal, and Alabama Power has no plans for large-scale use of switchgrass.

Wilson has cut back to 120 acres of switchgrass and still plants most of his 3,200 acres in traditional row crops. He sells most of the switchgrass he raises as mulch.

"I would have thought we'd be completely planted in biomass right now, instead of corn and soybeans," said Wilson, 55, a jovial, broad-shouldered, lifelong farmer who covers his silver hair with a John Deere ballcap.

"I think Alabama Power doesn't have enough incentive to push the project," Wilson said. "I think until there is demand for renewable energy to the point people are willing to pay a little more for it, it's not going to come about in the power industry."

Alabama Power has a Renewable Energy Rate program under which customers agree to buy 100 kilowatt hours of power for \$6 a month in addition to their regular bills. Only 95 customers are enrolled in the program, which uses the extra payments to cover the added cost of producing power with switchgrass or other renewable fuels.

Auburn University agronomist David Bransby, who assisted with the project, said Wilson remains the state's only switchgrass farmer. Alabama Power has no immediate plans to buy more switchgrass, although the company still has some to burn and will continue to look for alternatives to its primary energy sources: coal, natural gas, hydroelectric power and nuclear power, spokesman Michael Sznajderman said.

Bransby said electricity is relatively cheap in the Southeast, which makes it harder to be competitive while using alternative fuels. "The biggest problem is there is not a big market for switchgrass and similar materials at this point."

#### Farming for ethanol:

But there is a new possibility. Bransby said the rising cost of gasoline and President Bush's call to curb oil imports are creating demand for ethanol, a form of alcohol that can be mixed with gasoline to reduce petroleum consumption. The price spike after last year's hurricanes added momentum, he said.

"There's no question the demand is there now," Bransby said. "There's a national focus."

Most commercially produced ethanol in the United States is made from corn. But new technologies make it possible to make ethanol from switchgrass, wood fibers and other plant matter. Bush mentioned ethanol production from switchgrass during his State of the Union speech in January, and last August he signed into law the Renewable Fuels Standard, which requires increases in the usage of ethanol and biodiesel.

Wilson said Alabama can benefit from that initiative. He would welcome the chance to grow switchgrass or a similar biomass crop for ethanol production.

"The potential is great," Wilson said. "I'm excited about new ethanol production more than power production."

Wilson said he learned from the Alabama Power project that it's expensive to transport switchgrass because of its bulk. He said a switchgrass farmer would need to be within 50 miles of an ethanol plant for cost effectiveness.

There are 101 ethanol plants in the United States and 30 more under construction, according to the American Coalition for Ethanol. About half are farmer-owned cooperatives, and most are in the Midwest because that's the best place to grow corn.

#### 'A lot of hustling':

Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., who has visited Wilson's switchgrass farm, co-sponsored a bill last year to require production of more cars that burn alternative fuels, including ethanol.

"Alabama clearly has the potential to be an ethanol producer," Sessions said. "We've mandated a steadily increasing amount of ethanol. That means companies have to have it, and they have to buy it somewhere."

There is no commercial production of ethanol from switchgrass or other forms of biomass, such as wood chips, Bransby said, but several companies have developed the technology. He said the federal government needs to make funding available to help those companies build commercial-scale plants.

"There is a lot of hustling to try to get the first one up and running," Bransby said. "We're doing our best to

try to get the first one in Alabama."

Wilson said he hasn't profited from his switchgrass venture but still likes the idea of finding new ways to make the farming profitable. At one point he proposed building a switchgrass-burning power plant on his own farm, an idea he said is still feasible. He envisions farmers making their own ethanol from switchgrass they raise and using the fuel to power their own tractors and farm equipment.

He said the United States is lagging some others in developing alternative fuels. For example, Bransby said, Brazil meets 40 percent of its demand for fuel with ethanol produced from sugar cane and has eliminated the need for imported oil. "Why aren't we doing something like that?" Wilson asked.

Alabama Power's next venture with renewable fuel will be a partnership with the U.S. Forest Service. Small-diameter trees that are removed from a 500-acre section of the Talladega National Forest to reduce fire risk and improve habitat will be ground into chips to burn with coal. A \$250,000 Department of Agriculture grant will help pay for the project.

E-mail: [mcason@bhamnews.com](mailto:mcason@bhamnews.com)

© 2006 The Birmingham News

© 2006 al.com All Rights Reserved.