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Clemson to host Switch grass Conference

Vince Jackson, Special to the Independent-Mail
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CLEMSON — In a move to bring more crops into the biofuel mix, Clemson University is hosting a conference to explore alternative fuels, Switchgrass: Energy of the Future, on Thursday in Florence.

By assembling an inter-disciplinary team of scientists, legislators and corporate sponsors, which will be named at the conference, Clemson hopes to bring switchgrass into the biofuel mainstream.

Switchgrass is a drought-resistant perennial and native to the central prairies of the United States. It can grow in poor soils, in sun or some shade and it can be used as livestock forage. In appearance switchgrass looks like many of the ornamental grasses used in landscaping in South Carolina, often reaching heights of 6 feet or more.

Switchgrass is considered a good candidate for biofuel, especially ethanol fuel production, because of its hardiness, experts said.

It grows rapidly, needs little fertilizer or care and tolerates poor soils and stressful climate conditions, according to Clemson researchers.

The new word in biofuels technology is “cellulosic.” Cellulosic ethanol is chemically identical to ethanol from other sources, such as corn starch, but is more abundant and cheaper to grow. However, it does require higher levels of energy to extract the sugar used to make the ethanol.

Unlike corn, an ethanol producer, switchgrass can produce 6 to 10 tons per acre. This translates to about 1,000 gallons of ethanol per acre, while sugarcane yields 665 gallons and corn about 400 gallons per acre of ethanol, according to research conducted by the Texas State Energy Office.

Conversely, research conducted at the University of California, Berkeley claims switchgrass is overrated and that the sugar-rich perennial has a negative ethanol fuel energy balance, which requires nearly 50 percent more fossil fuel energy than the ethanol produced.

Clemson University is planting experimental plots of switchgrass at their Pee Dee Research and Education Center in Florence. Clemson hopes to establish switchgrass farms in the area, according to the conference Web page.

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