Indigenous switch grass could be a boon to local economy

By Robert Felten (Courier)
The Post and Courier
Monday, December 29, 1998

EDITOR’S NOTE: When U.S. Rep. Jim F. Clyburn was re-elected to the 9th district in 1998, he said improving the Interstate 95 corridor was his obsession. That is one of the major arteries in one county, and to move the switch grass in South Carolina to the west, some roads will need to be paved and sidewalks added.

Clyburn and election of Barack Obama provides new hope.

This or that second to a four-part series about changes underway along the I-95 corridor.

NEWBERRY — If it is black gold, then Dr. James Frederick is one of many trying to spin straw into a new kind of gold.

Frederick is an agronomist with Clemson’s Pee Dee Research and Education Center, located on farmland halfway between Florence and Darlington.

The grass can be grown in the sandy soils and dry conditions along South Carolina’s inner coastal plain, east and west of Interstate 95.

Their list of questions include: What is the best time to harvest it? How many times can you harvest it? What is the lowest minimum of fertilizer and pesticides?

So far, two farmers in Marlboro County have taken the plunge and planted about 150 acres of switch grass, mostly because they plan to sell the seeds, said Vic Bethel, a Clemson extension agent.

The grass thrives to the point where it breaks out of the plots and into the field, but it is still a challenge.

“We think it’s going to take off,” he said.

Reach Robert Felten at 377-5771 or rfelten@courierpostonline.com.

Brend Nerles
The Post and Courier

Dr. James Frederick, a professor at Clemson University, explained to U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn on Aug. 20 how a bio-experimental switch grass field could be used by farmers to get cash crops and also help with climate change issues.

He has watched the steady demise of tobacco and cotton here during the past 15 years, and he has seen the farm that has dealt rural towns such as Lake City, Mullins and Marion, where not only farmers but equipment and fertilizer dealers, seed merchants and warehouses have taken a hit.

“With the same amount of area and other crops, switch grass could provide a significant alternative to coal.

What much of the talk about switch grass’s promise hinges on how it can be converted to ethanol, it’s highly unlikely that a refinery will be built until there are many thousands of acres of switch grass growing in fields, said John R. Kane, chairman and chief executive officer of Carolina-Pacific LLC.

The only way to get the farming economy back is to find a ready market for this stuff, he said, "We are extremely well positioned to do that because of our access to shipping centers.”

But farmers have been reluctant to sign on so far, Kane hopes that will change.

“Imagine the economic impact if we had 100,000 acres and each acre yielded six tons of switch grass, which is what Dr. Frederick said it would do, and you’re paying the farmer $50 an acre, he said. That’s $500 million above the yield for soybeans or corn.

If you get 150,000 acres, you’re getting 2 million of the same idea. This would have a major impact in one and year out on the I-95 corridor. That income would be spread around in all these little communities that are so desolate.”

U.S. House Majority Whip Jim F. Clyburn has visited the Clemson research center during the past year and plants to return again next year.

"Until we started working on this project, I didn’t know that switch grass was indigenous to South Carolina," he said, adding that Minnesota and South Dakota also are among the many states looking into the plant. "Why aren’t we one of the states in the production of ethanol from switch grasses?"

Clyburn said he will consider allowing the tax credits to encourage switch grass and refinery here. “We’ve got to make it more attractive for people to take the risk,” he said.

Brend Nerles
The Post and Courier

Dr. James Frederick, a professor at Clemson University, explained how tall a field of switch grass can grow. Frederick is studying the use of switch grass as a biofuel and each stop for farmers at the Clemson Pee Dee Research and Education Center in Darlington County.

Excel don’t think biofuels alone can replace the nation’s dependence on foreign oil, but expect they will be part of a solution along with nuclear, wind and other power — and energy conservation.

And switch grass isn’t the sole potential biofuel. Scientists also are looking at residue from corn stalks, fast growing trees and other sources.

“Everybody wants a clean answer right now,” Frederick said. “Petroleum people have decades and decades to get to where they are right now, but switch grass does look pretty good in terms of return.”

Meanwhile, he and others will continue to research how well