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Researcher: Switchgrass as fuel sputters over lack of funding

By Garry Mitchell

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MOBILE, Ala. - In his call for greater use of alternative fuels, President Bush mentioned switchgrass as a possible source in the coming decades, but the idea may need a jump-start. A switchgrass researcher at Auburn University said federal policy-makers have delayed its commercial use by waiting for private industry to fund it.

"Industry won't fund it, because there's too much risk involved," said David Bransby, a professor and switchgrass researcher at Auburn's College of Agriculture. "We know how to grow it, but we need the market."

He said Alabama Power Co. has mixed switchgrass and wood chips with coal on a small scale at its power plant in Gadsden, but there's no other commercial use of switchgrass as fuel in Alabama.

Current federal policies only allow for funding at the pilot-scale level, which leaves many budding companies in a bind.

"We take them to the very last step and don't help them past that point," Bransby said last week in a phone interview. He said investors seldom step in to help these innovators complete the final step.

In his State of the Union address Tuesday night, Bush said he wants Congress to spend an extra \$60 million next year on making ethanol from things such as wood chips and switchgrass. His goal is to cut the nation's dependence on foreign oil imports. Bush set a goal of 2012 to have useable ethanol made from sources other than corn.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., had mentioned in a Jan. 27 conversation with Allan Hubbard, director of the president's National Economic Council, that ethanol could be made from switchgrass, Sessions spokesman Michael Brumas said.

Switchgrass was not in the president's prepared text given in advance to members of Congress, Brumas said Thursday, but was added apparently after Sessions' comments to Hubbard.

While new to the presidential podium, switchgrass isn't new to farm scientists.

Switchgrass crops planted on 10-to-20 acre plots in three Midwestern states in 2000 and 2001 are being studied to determine yields and its use as a biomass energy crop, according to USDA.

Trials were established on four farms in Nebraska and South Dakota and three farms in North Dakota.

A new emphasis on alternative fuels and a debate over farm spending form the backdrop for a U.S. House Agriculture Committee hearing Tuesday at Auburn University. It is the second in a series of committee hearings on agriculture policy and the 2007 Farm Bill kicking off Monday in Fayetteville, N.C.

Among farmers' chief concerns in the Farm Bill are commodity support payments and land conservation programs. They also have a strong interest in biofuels, such as wood chips, according to agriculture experts.

Cotton expert Mark Hall of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System in Madison County, said the state's corn and soybean growers are working with a consultant on a possible ethanol plant in Huntsville.

"Farmers could contribute a tremendous amount toward energy independence," Hall said. But he said the oil industry has "unbelievable resources at their disposal to protect the status quo."

Washington, D.C., lobbyist Ferd Hoefner, the policy director for the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, said he expects overall "level funding" for the next Farm Bill as advocates attempt to increase funding for conservation, energy and rural development.

In a statement, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., said since the last farm bill was written, farmers and ranchers have experienced significant challenges and opportunities in the world market. He said it's important that U.S. policies "reflect and adapt to this changing environment."

Limestone County cotton grower Stuart Sanderson has a message for the committee on funding farm programs: "Stand behind something voted in the past. Stay loyal to that."

He said farmers have to deal with their bankers in seeking crop loans. When farm programs are passed by Congress, then cut, he said, it raises a question: "What does a contract really mean? The integrity of it is not there."

On the Net:

<http://www.agriculture.house.gov>

<http://www.msawg.org>