

Switchgrass growers pin hopes on better varieties

New lines being developed will have better yields, quality, vigour and seed size



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crop a second look.

It's proven to be profitable for a small number of growers who together produce roughly 1,500 acres annually. Prices for grains and oilseeds have slipped. There's also been genetic improvements thanks to a breeding program established by Montreal-based REAP Canada.

"I think we have booth yield and quality advantage with our new lines," Roger Sampson, executive director, said.

Switchgrass has yet to move beyond niche status in Ontario but there are reasons to give the perennial

Along with yield improvements of about 20 per cent, there have been improvements in the areas of early



Don Nott says switchgrass, sold in bale form, is worth about seven cents a pound. The price may even be higher if expected shortage of wheat straw bedding materializes by spring.

vigour, seed dormancy, seed size and tillering.

REAP has developed the equivalent of an annual breed-

ing program for the perennial crop, Samson said.

Over the course of a single growing season, plants lacking the desired characteristics are eliminated at seven different points. The desired population is then propagated, with older populations being used to fertilizer new plantings.

RC Tecumseh and RC Hiawatha are both being tested at Don Nott's farm near Clinton where the Ontario Biomass Producers Co-operative hosted a field day on Sept. 5.

Nott and others at the day

talked about prices of around seven cents for baled switchgrass. Yields have ranged widely depending on soil type and fertigation.

On his drought-prone, sandy-loam field that's been in production for nine years, Nott produces 10,000 pounds per acre or better. He's found 65 pounds of nitrogen is about right.

On better ground, his son has produced as much as 14,500 pounds. Urs Eggiman's yields are lower but the Grey County farmer hasn't been applying nitrogen.

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