

**"I think we have both yield and quality advantages with our new lines."**

— Roger Sampson

"It's a beautiful crop," Nott said.

"If I could find enough markets for switchgrass I'd have 1,100 acres (with my son) instead of just 400."

So far, much of Ontario's switchgrass has been sold to dairy farmers for feed and compost and to mushroom producers as a compost component but other markets are developing.

Future opportunities may lie with its potential as an energy crop and as a feedstock for the production of construction materials, auto parts and other composites.

Composite prototypes are being produced by such companies as Toronto-based, White Cloud Innovations. Typically these involve a blend with plastic resins.

Jake DeBruyn, new technology engineer with Ontario's agriculture ministry, said there's interest in switchgrass for bio-digestion to produce methane and electricity.

In Europe, silage corn is used for the purpose, he said. Switchgrass may be a more affordable option and it's

beginning to make sense economically.

There are 35 bio-digesters in Ontario, most of which use a combination of manure and food waste. Most of the readily-available food waste is already being used, perhaps leaving the door open for switchgrass, DeBruyn said.

"We're close on the economics today. We just need to make sure it works in practical terms."

Dr. Gord Surgeoner, president of Ontario Agri-Food Technologies, said switchgrass lends itself to contractual arrangements between farmers and end users.

As pointed out by Nott, yields are consistent once the deep-rooted, drought-resistance crop is established.

There are any number of scenarios that have potential. For instance, a dairy farmer might sign a multi-year deal to purchase the crop for bedding, and then re-use that bedding as a feedstock for on-farm bio-digestion, Surgeoner said.

Purpose-grown biomass crops, including switchgrass, big bluestem and miscanthus, are a relatively new innova-

tion. Compared to crops like corn and soybeans, the level of investment into agronomic research and development is small.

Nott and a small number of other farmers have learned how to manage the crop. While switchgrass can be fall harvested using conventional haying equipment, Nott typically waits until spring.

There have also been improvements with establishment and weed management. Research over the past couple years shows that spring wheat can successfully be used as a nurse crop and earn growers an income during first-year establishment.

Another interesting aspect of switchgrass is its soil-building characteristics including its ability to sequester carbon.

However, carbon sequestration may not occur every year. A two-year evaluation at the Nott Farm by University of Guelph estimated a net gain of carbon one year but a loss in the other.

The loss may have been related to unusually dry weather that year.

# Francophone farmers get funding approval

L'union des cultivateurs franco-ontariens has received stable-funding approval from the tribunal.

It sailed through a public hearing and re-accreditation, a stark contrast with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario and the Ontario Branch of the National Farmers Union. All of them were initially denied re-accreditation and the OFA and CFFO only regained their stable-funding status after the provincial government changed the requirements and the NFU went to court to win its re-accreditation.

The association for French-speaking farmers in Ontario receives its funding indirectly via

the other three general farm organizations who forward a portion of their fees under an agreement they negotiated and the province has approved.

According to the decision of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Appeal Tribunal, the association's membership has increased by eight per cent since the previous three-year accreditation and now totals 657 regular members.

Twenty-one of them have registered under the new government standards that came into effect July 1.

The re-accreditation is for another three years which will end Nov. 8, 2017.

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