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Switchgrass supply falling short of growing demand

Markets are rapidly developing for the crop as livestock bedding, ginseng cover, as well as feed



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The switchgrass industry, after years of fits and starts, has taken root. There's currently more demand than what can be supplied by the 1,000-plus acres currently in production in Ontario.

There's also more than one market.

Dairy farmers are buying switchgrass for bedding and feed and there are a number of other bedding markets. Now two US companies involved with erosion control systems are offering contracts at a premium to what growers have been paid for switchgrass at the farmgate in recent months, according to a member of the Ontario Biomass Growers Co-operative.

"Seven-and-a-quarter cents per pound. That's been the standard for quite a while," Don Nott said.

"Now there's a market that has developed over the last couple months ... A couple companies out of the United States have made us offers of nine cents per pound ... We could probably use another 3,000 to 4,000 acres right now."



Thanks to switchgrass innovators like Urs Eggiman, Don Nott and Roger Sampson, the guesswork has been taken out of establishing the warm season crop.

It's a good position to be in but it's left the co-operative's members with a decision to make. Sales to the US are an attractive option but to move all the production south of the border would leave Canadian customers out of the picture for the short term.

These include several dairy farmers along with other livestock producers and horse owners who've been using switchgrass as a premium bedding product.

One of the more interesting applications is bedding on top of rubber cow comfort mats. Ground and passed through quarter-inch screen, switch-

grass is said to be superior to either wood chips or straw. It tends to stay in place, rather than being pushed aside as cows get up and down and move about, and while absorbent, also has the quality of being able to release the moisture it accumulates.

Thomas Murray of Murray Farm and Kees Van Esveld of Kesi Farm are both pleased with the product, having used it for several months. They're featured in a video on the co-operative's website.

"We change our bedding two times a day and we put about two inches of organic matter on top the mat," Murray said, speaking from his dairy barn near Seaforth.

"If we had a straw in here, this mat would be bare and the cows would be rubbing on that rubber ... There's more of a potential of abrasion on the skin. You're going to have hock and leg issues ... So, we want to keep that covered. They're more comfortable. They're spending that time 16 to 18 hours a day on that mat just ruminating, producing

milk. They're happier. I'm happier."

Esveld, near Clinton, pointed to the hock of one of his cows in the video, showing how the hair was almost entirely grown back.

"Because it is soft, it's better for the cows," he said. "It's the combination of the mats with the softness of the switchgrass."

Marlene Paibomesai, dairy specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, also weighed in.

"Preliminary research done at the University of Guelph has shown that switchgrass has less incidence of mastitis compared to wheat straw bedding," she said.

Other bedding markets include dairy pack barns, group sow housing and poultry. Switchgrass also is being used successfully as a source of roughage in total-mixed-ration (TMR) feed formulations and for a range of agricultural mulching applications.

Along with the development of new markets, there has been

improvements in the crop itself.

The erosion control market in the US relates to switchgrass's superior characteristics to wheat straw.

One company, Diamond Sock, is using the warm season grass for its SwitchSock product. Diamond Sock began with a single manufacturing location in Pennsylvania but has since expanded in Pennsylvania and to Ohio and Connecticut as well.

Growers like Nott, and James Fisher, president of the biomass co-operative, now have access to improved switchgrass cultivars developed by Montreal-based

Resource Efficient Agricultural Production (R.E.A.P.) Canada.

"It will be the cooperative members who have first access to the new varieties," Fisher said.

There's up to 20 per cent increased yield potential with the new varieties and it's felt they're easier to establish.



Mulch for ginseng production is among the many niche markets for switchgrass.

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