

SWITCHGRASS

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Fisher, who is in the hay business, has 150 acres of switchgrass on sloping ground that's part of the Niagara Escarpment near Burlington. Even with the older cultivars, he sees switchgrass as a profitable crop.

These yield around four to five metric tonnes per acre at location with a gross return of more than \$600 per acre.

"Once you get it established, you basically have no cost except the cost of harvesting it and maybe a little nitrogen. If you are in the haying business like we are, you already have the equipment."

Switchgrass is usually harvested in early spring, prior to the haying season. At that point most of the nutrients in the above-ground portion of crop have leached back to the soil.

Nott sees the crop as being part of a five to seven-year rotation. He said his son, Dan, already has experience growing corn and soybeans after a long-established stand of switchgrass.

It's a good piece of ground but well short of the best that Huron County has to offer.

Nott said his son had a soybean yield of 52 bushel per acre and 212 bushels of corn per acre in 2016—a dry year. While some fertilizer was provided for the corn crop, the input used for the soybeans was inoculant.

"The root mass from switch gives you organic matter and that gives you water-holding capacity," Nott said.

"Another big benefit of switchgrass is that it revitalizes the land and if you keep it down for five or six year you create a clean field with less disease and weed seeds."

Nott feels the positive impact on cash crops from having switchgrass in the rotation should last several years.

Fisher and Nott are among 33 members of the co-operative and are both ramping up their production.

That's going to take time. During the establishment year, there's no harvest. A small harvest may be available in the second year and, by the third year, production should have reached or be close to the full yield potential.

New growers entering the industry have an advantage. Far more is known about the agronomics of producing switchgrass and the markets into which it's being sold.

That's due in part to the efforts of the cooperative, which was established in 2009, but others have been involved, including specialists with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and Roger Sampson with R.E.A.P.

Sampson has been a proponent of the crop, and other biomass species, for years.

He said his switchgrass journey began with research paper concerning warm season grasses when he was a student at the University of Guelph in 1983. Three years later R.E.A.P. Canada was launched but the organization's focus on switchgrass and other biomass crops only began in 1991.

The early interest for the purpose-grown biomass crop revolved around the production of energy, a renewable alternative to fossil fuels. That potential remains, but the evolution of the crop has taken it in new directions.

"I think switchgrass is com-

ing into its own," Sampson said.

"There's no reason we couldn't be at 10,000 to 30,000 acres in Ontario in five to 10 years ... It's been a long haul and I think we have a sustainable growth strategy."

Finding the right markets has been a challenge along with learning how to establish and harvest the crop. For new entrants into the industry, it's become a lot easier.

Sampson is the author or co-author of a number of publications detailing production

methods and how the crop can be used for a wide range of mulching and bedding applications.

Using Switchgrass and Miscanthus as Sustainable Livestock and Poultry Bedding and Using Switchgrass and Miscanthus in Mulching Applications were just recently released.

Switchgrass has also taken root in Quebec where markets have been developed in the dairy industry, poultry industry, as strawberry mulch and for other niche markets.

Pork drives record U.S. red meat month

Driven by record-high pork production, overall U.S. red meat output also moved into record territory in February.

According to the latest USDA report, total red meat production amounted to 4.06 billion pounds in February, up three per cent from February 2017.

Pork production reached record numbers for the month at 2.06 billion pounds, four per cent higher than the year before. The increase was due mainly to a three per cent rise in hogs going for slaughter.

Beef production was three per cent higher than the previous year at 1.98 billion pounds, with cattle slaughter trending two per cent higher.

Veal production also rose by three per cent to 5.8 million pounds, while lamb and mutton production increased five per cent to 11.8 million pounds.

Through the first two months of 2018, U.S. red meat output sits at 8.65 billion pounds, five per cent higher than in 2017. Beef and pork production are up five per cent, while veal and lamb and mutton are four per cent higher.