

Contact: Patricia Ellingwood
Ontario Forage Council
519 986-1484
1-877-892-8663

206 Toronto St. S.
PO Box 463
Markdale, ON N0C
1H0support@ontarioforagecouncil.com
www.ontarioforagecouncil.com

Biomass Field Day in Grey County

PRESS RELEASE

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Although the weather outside was gloomy on October 19th, conversation was lively inside the hilltop shed at Eggimann Farms. The Ontario Biomass Producers Co-operative, the Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority and the Ontario Forage Council blended resources to offer the "Biomass Field Day in Grey County". This event was a wealth of information regarding the opportunities of switchgrass production. Attendees were treated to an exciting panel of experts, including; Fred Brown, District Sales Manager, Quality Seeds, President, Ontario Forage Council, Ray Robertson, Manager, Ontario Forage Council, Bill Deen, Associate Prof., Dept. of Plant Agriculture, U of G, James Fisher, President OPBC, Don Nott, Switch Energy Corp., Director OBPC, Urs Eggimann, Eggimann Farms, Vice President OBPC, Ian McDonald, Applied Research Coordinator, Field Crops Unit, OMAF, and Jo-Anne Harbinson, Manager of Water Resources and Stewardship Services.

There were also a number of key participants in the audience that offered valuable input on the subject. These attendees included: Duncan McKinlay, Grey County Warden, Paul McQueen, Deputy Mayor of Grey Highlands, "The Bio-plastics Project Lead" for a major Ontario auto manufacturer, Don McCabe, Vice President OFA, Board of Directors AAC, and Kate Withers, PhD Candidate at University of Guelph, Board Advisor OBPC. All aspects of the biomass industry were well represented by the panelists who toured listeners through the entire biomass process and market opportunities.

Fred Brown welcomed attendees to the event and thanked everyone for braving the soggy weather. Fred explained that the biomass industry is generating new interest for the OFC, and as the voice for forages in Ontario, the organization welcomes the invitation to be involved. Later in the day, Ray Robertson shared that the OFC had recently applied for research funding on behalf of the OBPC to assist in further testing of switchgrass fertility. Shortly following the event, OFC received approval of the funding and is looking forward to providing information extension of the project results.

Audience members enjoyed learning from Bill Deen on his biomass research efforts at the University of Guelph which ultimately led to the OSCIA Biomass Field Trial, where he and some of his students played a very active role in research initiatives. Bill has been a significant presence during all major biomass events.

Jamie Fisher, representing the OPBC, explained that in a significant bio-economy, only a well-organized group can meet the needs of a demanding industry with a huge need for biomass feedstock. The role of OBPC is to open sustainable markets, some of which are available now to a limited extent, and some promising opportunities are still a few years in the future. The production of biomass is based on a 3-year start-up cycle, which means that there is a need for the necessary biomass acreage now to meet demands in 3 years.

Don Nott presented an update of current and future biomass market opportunities. Current markets for switchgrass include animal bedding (switchgrass is suitable for organic operations), fibre supplements for feed rations and increasingly more important switchgrass as a component for mushroom substrate. Some very promising applications with a longer time horizon include products with Ag fibre content, like bioplastics (e.g. automotive parts) and fibre boards for construction and furniture manufacturing. Based on lab tests, it is known that organic composite boards with switchgrass fibres can reach up to 4 times the structural strength of conventional strand boards. From an environmental stand point, it is an additional bonus that fibre boards can now be manufactured without any toxic substances or emissions. According to Don, the environmental benefits of growing switchgrass are very substantial and switchgrass farmers can make a significant contribution to our environment in many different ways. Don also emphasized the economic advantage switchgrass growers have in the Grey-Bruce region. The significantly lower rental rates of marginal farmland more than make up for higher yield expectations with more optimal land.

Ian McDonald explained OMAF and MRA's perspective. One of Ian's chief concerns is soil health. He sees a big advantage in growing perennial crops, like switchgrass, to maintain and even improve a healthy soil structure.

The dreary weather did not keep our guests inside. Although the tour was shortened from five to three fields, this was still a great opportunity to view switchgrass in different stages of development. The educational opportunity continued throughout the tour with information from Jo-Anne Harbinson on the environmental benefits of growing switchgrass. Grasslands not only provide a great buffer zone for marshes and waterways (while providing a natural filtration system), they also have significant appeal to those interested in creating sanctuary for ground nesting birds.

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There were also a number of supportive and knowledgeable members of the audience whose presence was encouraging to those considering the industry. Their comments and questions to the panel sparked some truly dynamic interaction between the audience and the experts.

Paul McQueen listened closely as Don Nott reviewed current and future market opportunities then questioned the panel on the availability of those opportunities to Grey County producers. As Deputy Mayor of Grey Highlands, his main concern was the ability to present these opportunities to the local farming communities with the promise of local processing opportunities.

The panel members unanimously agreed that the opportunities were strong for the Grey County residents. The response to Paul McQueen's enquiry was energetic! It was at that point that "The Bioplastics Project Lead" for a major Ontario auto manufacturer joined the active exchange to stress the following points:

1. The biomass industry needs to be aware that there is a very large potential for biomass chemicals and plastics.
2. There is considerably more profit to be made from chemicals and composites than energy.
3. The auto industry uses massive amounts of plastic and we are constantly looking for ways to reduce weight and cost.
4. Realize that a mid-size car can contain 400+ lbs of plastic, and our testing shows that we can replace upwards of 30% of that material with biomass in time.
5. Auto manufacturers are constantly looking for ways to reduce dependence on oil based products while at the same time, reducing our environmental impact.
6. The use of biomass, in our studies, is proving to be a very effective way to accomplish those goals.
7. Because of strict manufacturing parameters, we need close controls on product quality so the idea of purpose grown materials is very attractive.
8. Moving forward, there will need to be a close relationship developed between producers, processors and end users.
9. The product development will take time as will the raw material growth, by working together, we can grow the industry at a rate that is manageable from both sides.

Don McCabe became very active in the conversation as he urged farmers to get off the sideline and start playing an active role in the production of biomass. He explained that the key to developing any opportunities in the Grey County is to have producers delivering product in the area. The large acreage of marginal land in Grey County presents the possibility; the producers will create the opportunity.

Kate Withers responded post event with a summary of the valuable information she gained from the day. Thank you to Kate for providing the following feedback:

"What I learned:

Switchgrass Agronomy:

-Establishment is key. Establishing a field requires a lot of planning during the field season prior to planting. Know your weeds! You need a plan for controlling biennial and perennial weeds.

-Nitrogen Fertilizer- Rate will depend on your yield potential and soil type. Too much N could cause lodging (and be lost to the environment).

-P and K - have soils tested before establishment and monitor by testing at the same time each year (Use representative sampling)

-Seeding rates - some dormancy remains in the seeds, seed on the higher side if possible.

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For Future Agronomic discussions:

Soil Ph and liming!

Switchgrass Markets/Economics:

There is great potential in the automotive and construction industry for switchgrass biomass."

The participation of both the experts and the audience resulted in an exciting exchange between the research, market development, and production areas of the biomass industry. The field day was successful in connecting key players capable of taking the biomass industry to the next level.

A very special thank you to Urs and Else Eggimann, who warmly welcomed participants to Eggimann Farms. As well as their very helpful neighbors, whose hospitality was greatly appreciated by all!

In conclusion to this successful day Urs had this to say:

"I was very pleased with the successful cooperation of our 3 organizations. As a team we accomplished way more than would have been possible on an individual basis. OFC, SVCA and OBPC complement each other very nicely and bring all valuable expertise and visions to the table of which all 3 groups can benefit and which leads us closer to a viable bio-economy.

My switchgrass research and production efforts are primarily focused on marginal farmland, which is plentiful in Grey-Bruce and surrounding counties.

Even though marginal farmland generates additional challenges, we have found effective ways to overcome many obstacles and opened the way for future producers. The OSCIA biomass program was very helpful to do this type of research effort. Without this program it would have been extremely difficult to achieve the same result.

One of our greatest challenges leading to a successful bio-economy in our province is to break the deadlock of supply and demand. Farmers wait for guaranteed markets and the industry is looking for reliable supplies. Clearly, we need some leadership on both sides to break this chicken and egg syndrome. Thanks to early adopters who were willing to take some significant risks, we managed to achieve the current level of success and progress. It is an absolute must that this avant-guard group gets now the necessary support from new producers.

One of my fundamental questions and challenges is to find effective ways to create a viable local bio-economy. We have to find innovative ways to optimize our logistics and pre-process capacity of our biomass on a local or regional level with the ultimate goal to have satellite biomass production facilities in our region.

Dedicated biomass crops are very predictable and resilient, with limited fluctuations regardless of different growing conditions. It is in the interest of producers and the bio-industry to enter steady long term contracts. This approach protects both sides from undesirable market swings with reduced up- and down-sides."

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