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## Switchgrass getting touted as an efficient ethanol source

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Associate Editor

HENDERSON, Md. — Switchgrass got a lot of attention during the recent ethanol frenzy, touted as a feedstock more efficient than corn with more conservation benefits.

Locally, though, switchgrass is not widely planted outside of conservation buffers and wildlife habitat restoration, which keeps harvesting to a minimum.

But University of Maryland Extension researchers hope a new project will get the ball rolling on farmers growing switchgrass as a marketable crop. Speaking at the Chester River Association's Queen Anne's County conservation luncheon on Feb. 4, Russell Brinsfield, director of the University's Wye Research and Education Center, briefly outlined the project to about 40 attendees.

Brinsfield said that switchgrass plots have been growing at the Wye for about 10 years to study the plant's root development and nutrient uptake.

A few years ago the center began burning switchgrass to heat the center's equipment repair shop and studied for its value as a fuel source.

Research at the Wye indicated that switchgrass can be highly effective for reducing subsurface nitrogen loss from cropland and also provide a good feedstock for biofuel production.

Now, a \$600,000 grant-funded project has eight farmers in the Chester River watershed signed up to grow 100 acres of switchgrass to allow the Wye's biofuel researcher Ken Staver to continue the center's research on a wider scale.

"The goal in this is to look at its impact on water quality, organic build up and use as a fuel," Brinsfield said. "We see this as the next step as to how we can use marginal ground, protect water quality and give the farmer something he can use."

Brinsfield said the 100 acres includes a diverse selection of ground, including highly erodible soil and low lying areas.

Paul Spies, CRA conservation planner who hosted the luncheon, said the aim of the project is not to encourage farmers to switch entire fields to switchgrass, but start with areas where there is little to no profit in growing commodity crops.

"We're looking for the ground where switchgrass will work the best," Spies said.

One possible end use for the switchgrass grown by the farmers is to be burned to heat buildings at Washington College in Chestertown, Md., as part of college's initiative to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions.

Brinsfield said there have only been a few conversations about it with the school and nothing is definite.

Along with switchgrass, presentations were given on sensor-based variable rate nitrogen application with GreenSeeker technology, and other conservation programs available to Maryland farmers.

Michael Moore, chairman of the CRA's agriculture committee, told the group that the annual luncheon is intended to strengthen their relationship with farmers in the watershed.

"You are our best hope in restoring the Chester River," he said. "We understand you need to stay in business next year and the year after to remain stewards."

A breakfast was held on the following day for Kent County farmers where the same topics were discussed.

Spies said between the two meetings, more than 100 farmers attended.