Agricultural Uses for Warm Season Grasses

Switchgrass (Panicum virgatum) is a perennial, warm season grass native to most of the eastern United States. It is drought and salt tolerant, needs little to no fertilizer and does well in shallow, wet soils. Its long roots improve soil and water quality by absorbing nutrients and sequestering carbon dioxide. The seven to eight foot tall grass benefits wildlife, offering optimal nesting and cover. Switchgrass is recommended for marginal lands in which other crops would not produce strong yields, specifically wet, low lying areas or those susceptible to erosion. While many are aware of the merits of switchgrass for such things as biofuel feedstock, many are less familiar with its potential use for a number of agricultural applications.

Forage

Switchgrass, like a number of other native warm season grasses (NWSG), can produce high-quality forage. Switchgrass used in a system of rotational grazing allows for robust growth during the hot summer months. University of Tennessee findings suggest the nutrient content of this forage can be as high as 16-17 percent crude protein, if harvested correctly. Ground switchgrass straw is experiencing increased use as a **forage extender** in feeds for livestock. It works to increase bulk and dilute protein in operations with sources of high protein feed.

Nutrient Runoff Prevention

Switchgrass has extensive roots that can grow as deep as five to six feet into the ground. In addition to serving as a superior soil stabilizer in erosion control, this plant and its root system form a tremendous ecological filter — soaking up nutrients like nitrogen and sequestering carbon dioxide. Use of switchgrass as a buffer between agricultural activity and watersheds is seen by many as one of the best methods for protection of these priceless resources.

Poultry and Livestock Bedding

Studies have shown that ground switchgrass in loose form is easy on the pads of chickens' feet, is highly absorptive and offers a benefit over other beddings in the prevention of ammonia. Recently, NWSG pellets are being produced for use in horse stalls. This product is gaining popularity among horse owners for its superior absorption properties, ease of cleanup and the comfort it provides the animals. These developing markets for NWSGs offer significant promise for producers interested in growing them on their own land, either for their own operational use or as an additional revenue crop.

Note: Producers of warm season grasses now have an organization through which to glean and share information on these exciting new markets and the potential for NWSGs in agricultural operations. The ***Association of Warm Season Grass Producers (AWSGP)*** *has recently formed. Learn more at* ***www.awsgp.org****.*