

Oregon

Poplar test plots may hold key to biofuels

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

JEFFERSON, Ore. — It's like leasing ground to the future. On about 90 acres that in the past was planted in vegetables and corn for silage, researchers are raising varieties of fast-growing poplar trees that can be used to make biofuels and other products.

It's an idea that's been promoted and federally funded for several years, but the promise of making fuel and industrial chemicals from renewable plants instead of petroleum has yet to fall in step with market reality.

If the two link up — believers say it's inevitable — Pacific Northwest and Northern California farmers might have another crop to consider.

Jefferson, Ore., landowner and farmer Rob Miller, who leased about 90 acres to Greenwood Resources, a global timber company based in Portland, said marginal land in Oregon's Willamette Valley might be ideal for growing hybrid poplars.

Acreage in the 45-mile stretch from Albany south to Eugene that is not irrigated and is used for grass seed



Rick Stonex, right, tree farm manager for Greenwood Resources, extols the biofuel potential of poplar trees to incoming Oregon State University students.

production, for example, might work for poplars, he said.

The trees regrow after being cut and can produce six crops in a 20-year period.

After the initial planting cost, they require little care and can be harvested and chipped

with forage cutting machinery. With additional irrigation water likely to be hard to get in the future, growing trees for bio-chemicals is an attractive option, Miller said.

"It would be a really good crop if the market turned around," he said.

There's the rub. The U.S. push to develop alternative fuels is stalled by a drop in oil prices and reserves tapped by fracking technology. Biofuels require simultaneous cart-and-horse development of expensive refineries and the acreage to feed them.

But many believe biofuels' time is coming. The environmental cost of fossil fuels, instability in the Middle East and the limit of U.S. supplies could raise oil prices.

"Which puts this stuff right back into the sweet spot," said Rick Stonex, westside tree farm manager for Greenwood Resources.

GreenWood is part of the Advanced Hardwood Biofuels Northwest consortium, which includes other industry partners and researchers from six universities. The consortium is one of six research efforts funded by the USDA since 2011, compiling a total of \$146 million.

The ultimate goal of the project is to produce "drop in" fuel that is compatible with conventional cars, trucks and aircraft. Given the state of the oil industry, however, the partners are focusing on high-value bio-chemicals such as acetic acid, ethyl acetate and cellulosic ethanol, that are produced in the first stages of the biofuel process. Those chemicals can replace petroleum-based products used to make plastics, paints and even runway de-icer.

In addition to the Jefferson project site, researchers are growing hybrid poplars in Hayden, Idaho; Pilchuck, Wash.; and Clarksburg, Calif.

GreenWood also has a poplar plantation growing alongside Interstate 84 near Boardman, in Eastern Oregon. Those trees are intended to feed a refinery planned by ZeaChem Inc. The company plans to break ground on the plant next spring.

Sixteen students who will be freshmen at Oregon State University this fall toured the Jefferson test plot Sept. 15 with Greenwood's Stonex and Rich Shuren, the company's director of tree improvement operations.

Wiman new OSU hazelnut specialist

By MITCH LIES
For the Capital Press

Nik Wiman, an entomologist with extensive experience in integrated pest management, is Oregon State University's new orchard crops extension specialist, a position designed to focus on hazelnuts.

Wiman, 38, started in his new position Sept. 16. He is based out of the North Willamette Valley Research and Extension Center in Aurora, Ore.

Wiman replaces Jeff Olsen as the lead hazelnut extension specialist in Oregon. Olsen served the hazelnut industry for nearly 30 years as a Yamhill County Extension agent before he died unexpectedly in January of 2014.

Wiman, however, will have more research responsibility than did Olsen, according to Mike Bondi, regional administrator of the Clackamas County Extension Office and director of the North Willamette Valley Research and Extension Center.

"Nik has more of a research expertise background (than Olsen did) and will be able to fill a role that more fully integrates the applied research as well as the extension and outreach piece," Bondi said.

"We really felt that Nik was by far the strongest candidate," Bondi said. "And we are very, very fortunate to get someone who has been working some with hazelnuts, because, obviously, it is hard to find people with a background with that crop."

Wiman holds a doctorate in entomology from Washington State University, where he worked extensively in tree fruits, and holds a master's and a bachelor's degree from Montana State University.

Wiman, who spent the past three years working as a post doctorate in Oregon's brown marmorated stink bug project, said he already has started working with hazelnut growers to identify and prioritize research projects.

"I plan to be involved in issues like irrigation, weed management and cover crops," Wiman said.

"But the biggest thing I think is needed is effective communication to growers, particularly new growers coming on. There is really good information out there that OSU has put together. And also the hazelnut commission has good information, but there is not a one-stop place people can go and find out everything they need to know," he said.

Free pesticide collection set for Malheur County

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — A free pesticide collection event for agricultural producers in Malheur County will be held Oct. 23.

The first-ever such event for farmers and commercial applicators in Eastern Oregon was last year.

Oregon State University Cropping Systems Extension Agent Bill Buhrig, who is helping coordinate the event,

said, "It's a pleasant surprise" that another free collection is being held so soon. "We're trying to get the word out to everybody to take advantage of it."

A total of 10,506 pounds of unusable pesticides were collected during the 2014 event and organizers are expecting a similar amount this year, said Kevin Masterson, toxics coordinator for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The collection event is be-

ing funded by ODEQ and the Oregon Department of Agriculture and the work has been contracted out to Clean Harbors Environmental Services.

Masterson said a household hazardous waste collection is being held the day before and because Clean Harbors is the waste collector for both events, it made sense to hold another pesticide collection.

"It allows us to stretch our dollars further by pairing those two events," he said.

The pesticide collection event will occur from noon to 4 p.m. at Ontario Sanitary Service, 540 SE Ninth Ave. in Ontario.

Growers must fill out an application and pre-register with Clean Harbors. The pre-registration requirement is only for logistics purposes so the company can schedule drop-off times and not be overwhelmed, said Graham Gatzia of Clean Harbors.

People can use only their first names if they wish, he

said.

"The only reason I ask them for a name at all is so I can contact them and make an appointment," he said.

Buhrig said the sole purpose of the event is to get rid of unwanted pesticides and the registration information is for internal use only and won't be shared with any government agency or third party.

After an application is submitted, Clean Harbors will call the grower and schedule a drop-off time.

Blue Mountain buys Barenbrug's land, plant in Imbler

By MITCH LIES
For the Capital Press

IMBLER, Ore. — The spark from a cutting machine that ignited a blaze at Barenbrug USA's seed-cleaning facility near Imbler earlier this year did more than damage the facility. It also served as the catalyst behind the purchase of the facility by Blue Mountain Seeds.

After the March 31 fire, Barenbrug decided to stop cleaning seed at the facility, creating an opportunity for Blue Mountain to expand.

"We needed room to expand," said Bill Merrigan, manager of Blue Mountain Seeds. "We were right at capacity, both cleaning capacity and storage, and we were out of land to build on. We viewed this as a good opportunity.

"If growers choose to increase grass seed acres in Union County, we'll have the facilities to handle it," he said.

The purchase includes the plant's 4-acre lot and 5 acres connecting an existing Blue Mountain seed-cleaning facility and the former Barenbrug plant.

The purchase also includes a slightly damaged seed-cleaning line, which Blue Mountain plans to refurbish and use for cleaning fine-leaf fescue and bluegrass seed. A second line was destroyed in the fire.

Blue Mountain has already begun storing seed in the west end of the Imbler facility, which was not damaged in the fire, Merrigan said. That section alone adds about 2.5 million pounds of seed storage capacity to Blue Mountain's current capacity of 12 million pounds, he said.

Depending on how much of the facility Blue Mountain rebuilds, it could increase its storage capacity by another 2.5 million pounds, he said.

"We may not rebuild that fa-

cility the way it was," Merrigan said. "We may put up a new building, or we may try and change the design of that building. That is something we are discussing right now."

After the fire, Barenbrug USA decided to reinvest in a seed cleaning facility it operates in Boardman, Ore., rather than rebuild the Imbler plant, said company CEO and President James Schneider.

The Tangent, Ore.-based company has since added square footage to its Boardman plant and installed a third seed cleaning line, which is dedicated to cleaning bluegrass seed.

"Overall, it increases our capacity because it makes it more centralized," Schneider said. "We will actually be able to clean more product."

Adding to the incentive to sell the facility was its age, Schneider said. "It was an old facility, and because of our strategic plans, we felt it better to reinvest in our Boardman facility."

He added: "We are thankful that good came out of such an unfortunate event. Blue Mountain Seeds has always been a great neighbor, and we can't think of a better outcome than for the sale to allow both our companies to continue to invest in future growth."

Barenbrug plans to continue contracting with growers to produce seed in the Grande Ronde Valley, Schneider said.

"We're not abandoning the Grande Ronde Valley," he said. "We still have a field man based there and we are contracting directly with growers there. But we are now cleaning that seed in Boardman."



Merrigan

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