



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Biomass ag

A term that is being kicked around these days could become quite important in the years ahead. The term is "biomass agriculture." In simple words, it's the growing of certain plants that can be converted directly into fuel. The Department of Agriculture says, "This process of converting plant matter directly into a

commercial fuel source could circumvent the millions of years required for plant energy to become fossil fuel." It's anticipated that biomass production in time could account for one-tenth of U.S. energy needs.

Biomass production could arrive on the farm scene very quickly and could literally overwhelm production of many food and feed crops. Although research is going on in this relatively new area of agriculture, a lot is already known.

The basic production technology already exists, the major problem is converting biomass into useful energy at a price competitive with fossil fuels. But once that's solved, the implications for agriculture are tremendous.

For instance, the Agriculture Department says with present biomass technology, an estimated 100 million acres of biomass feedstock would need to be cultivated to yield fuel for one-tenth of current U.S. energy requirements. The experts think

there are about 110 million acres of additional land that could be converted to crop use by 1985.

Obviously, the energy crops would be competing with more conventional crops for those additional acres. Crop prices would become an important determinant in the mix. If the price is right and the fuel shortage critical enough, you can bet a lot of today's food and feed crop acres will be channeled into biomass production.

The concept of running an engine on something other than fossil fuel goes back many years. In fact, the first diesel engine exhibited in Paris in 1900 operated on peanut oil. Other vegetable oils were used in limited quantities until the period of cheap petroleum came along after World War II.

But now with skyrocketing fuel prices, serious consideration is once again being given to vegetable oils. It's not a question of will they work, but rather what do they cost? Right now sunflower oil

is available at \$2.24 a gallon, soybean oil at \$1.92. That's pretty costly compared to diesel fuel at \$1.20.

That doesn't make the biomass concept look too promising until you consider that during the 1970s the price of vegetable oil doubled while diesel fuel prices increased five-fold. Project that ahead a decade and you can see that vegetable oils could well be important fuels well before the turn of the century.

The Department of Agriculture figures many obstacles will have to be overcome before biomass agriculture becomes practical. Not the least of these problems will be converting farmers themselves to this new line of endeavor. And that may hinge in large part on government action. Uncle Sam might just subsidize production of certain energy crops just to get the concept going, or he might be required to as our fossil fuel supply dwindles.

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