

Farm Talk

by
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But now some researchers are talking about a return to wood burning, and this goes beyond the current interest in wood stoves and fireplaces in homes. These researchers are talking about fuel wood farms that would consist of densely planted, fast-growing trees. These farms would be harvested every two or three years to provide what the researchers call wood biomass. This would then be processed and used for fuel.

Right now wood makes up only one percent of America's energy requirements. But some researchers think that figure could be doubled. That would still be only two percent, but when you consider that the Alaskan pipeline provides only one percent of our petroleum you quickly see that stepped-up wood production could be very important.

Once the technology is finalized, wood farming could be an important agricultural enterprise. It's doubtful that it would replace corn and soybeans on the Delmarva peninsula but in some of the less tillable places in nearby states, wood farming might be an attractive alternative. It might use

land that would otherwise be left idle or used only for limited grazing — land that right now isn't doing very much.

Wood farming is not all profits and new energy. Conservationists think it could have a serious impact on the environment. They fear that acres not suited to cropping would be plowed-up and planted, thus causing erosion, water pollution, and all that goes with that kind of activity. Also, they fear that fuel wood farming might alter the eco-system by encouraging certain species of animals, such as elk and deer at the expense of other species.

Of course, consumers might be concerned that these fuel wood farms would take land away from food production, and that could happen, depending on its profitability. If it were financially worthwhile, a farmer might plant his land to trees that would require harvesting every two or three years instead of the annual planting and harvesting necessary for row crops.

A farmer approaching retirement age might seed his land to trees, thereby reducing his farming involvement and yet maintaining some agricultural productivity. He could plant the land and go on an extended vacation if he wanted, returning only long enough to harvest and replant.

It is doubtful that fuel wood farming would become profitable enough to pull important acreages away from food crops. Instead, marginal land will probably be used and the total agricultural

base increased. But it would provide an alternative if the price was right.

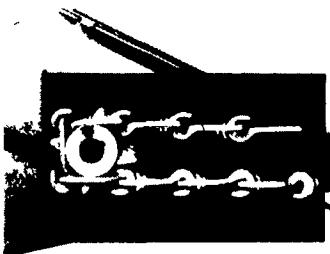
Researchers have already developed some species of fast-growing trees that can produce an amazing amount of wood farming for paper production and perhaps for use by chipping plants that make particle boards and imitation 2x4's.

What form the new wood energy would take is not totally clear to me. Perhaps this new fuel would be in the form of charcoal-like products or maybe small pieces that could be burned in the furnace like coal, or perhaps it could be compressed into larger chunks suitable for a fireplace or wood stove. It's funny how as researchers start looking for ways to solve our energy crisis they turn back to the land and back to technologies that were left in limbo 50 or 100 years ago. Suddenly everyone is rushing around trying to recapture the wood stove knowhow that was commonplace a century ago. And now we're talking about replanting the land to trees so that we can cut them down and use them for fuel, and that's just where we were two centuries ago when this nation was settled — cutting down trees to make farms and then using the wood for energy and building materials. Now we are talking about converting those farms into forests so we can repeat the process.

It's an interesting thought, one that might put a whole new set of pressures on American agriculture.

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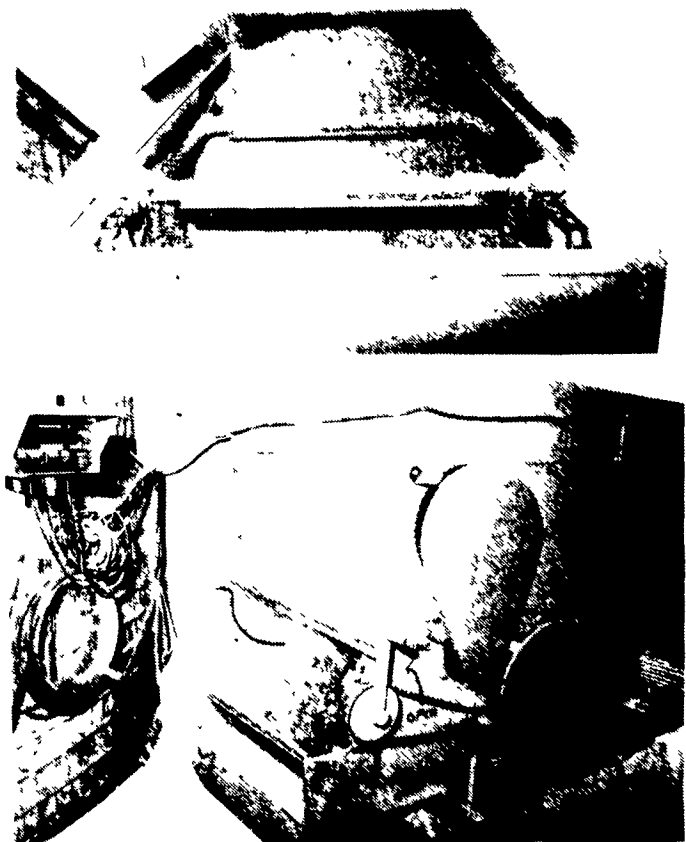
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