

The Prairie Builder comes to northern Halifax County

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Just about anyplace one goes these days within the agricultural community, conversations invariably include some discussion of biofuels, biomass feedstocks and the potential to grow these in southern Virginia.

Production of energy from biomass resources could stimulate economic growth, improve environmental quality, and enhance the energy security of the United States.

Biomass includes all plants and plant-derived material, such as corn and soybeans that are currently used to produce biofuels.

Recent advances in technology addressing the conversion of cellulosic materials such as wood and grasses have markedly increased the economic feasibility of producing a variety of biofuels.

Herbaceous energy crops have more variety and greater versatility than many other energy crops.

Some are annual crops with thick stems like sorghum and others are perennial with thin-stem like switchgrass.

The biomass feedstock that appears to be most promising is switchgrass, a native warm season grass that many cattlemen in our area currently utilize in their forage systems.

Switchgrass has the reputation of being difficult to establish, mainly due to very specific seeding requirements including depth of seed, seedbed preparation, cost and availability of seed, etc.

The generally accepted rule-of-thumb around this area is that it takes three years to successfully establish the grass, thereby making it unappealing to most agricultural producers.

Why go to all the trouble of seeding something that may or may not thrive, and then wait three years for a harvest?

What if someone would guarantee that the switchgrass they plant will not only thrive, but do so in one year?

Get ready to meet Fred Circle, "the prairie builder" from Ohio.

Circle visited this area several weeks ago to meet local ag producers and introduce them to his company, FDC Enterprises.

Interest in Circle's rapid, successful establishment of switchgrass was prompted by the award of a grant from the Virginia Tobacco Commission for the establishment of the warm-season grass as a forage and its potential use as a biomass feedstock.

The Agricultural Development Office of Halifax County, in conjunction with the Conservation Management Institute of Virginia Tech, coordinated Circle's visit to the area as a means of dispelling those rumors that switchgrass is just too difficult to establish.

Having established over 40,000 acres of warm-season grasses in the past four years, Fred Circle knows what he's doing!

Circle readily admits that in the past, establishing the grasses took about three years.

"You planted it and ran for cover," says Circle.

Event with specialized seeding drills, the seed tended to clump and it took years for the plants to spread. Meanwhile, weeds became established and shaded out much of the grass.

Today, Circle uses special retrofitted no-till drills to handle a mixture of big bluestem, indiangrass, and switchgrass. But, that's not his only trade secret!

Circle formed FDCE Grassland Services several years ago and takes great pride in his work, so much so that he will guarantee a successful stand of grass within one year. Not an easy promise to make, but one that he will stand by.

According to Circle, "We select the best seed available, then process it to enhance purity."

"We stratify all our seed, greatly increasing immediate seed germination."

"We add a proprietary micronutrient initiate a multi application herbicide program to minimize weed competition. Our attention to detail is the reason this program is so successful."

In addition to visiting several area farms to view stands of switchgrass, Circle also presented information to various agency personnel and area ag producers who are interested in establishing the grass as a livestock forage and possible utilizing it as a biomass feedstock.

Everyone in attendance was impressed with Circle's presentation and most left with a desire for more information as well as the desire to see Circle's planting technique in action.

Toward the end, Circle will be in this area in June to plant a few demonstration sites and to offer his company's services to area producers.

Linda Wallace, Ag Development Director in Halifax County, will be coordinating the planting of at least four demonstration plots in Halifax, Mecklenburg, Charlotte, and Pittsylvania counties.

Wallace hopes to "show and tell" folks about the establishment of switchgrass, its use as a drought-tolerant forage, and its potential for use as a biomass feedstock.

According to Wallace, "The bioenergy industry appears promising in this area and the production of biomass feedstocks could provide our farmers with opportunities to grow an alternative crop that could be used in a number of ways.

"Switchgrass can be grazed and cut for hay, complimenting our recent efforts to enhance the cattle industry in this area, or it could be marketed as a biomass feedstock."

"This is just too interesting and too promising not to aggressively pursue at this point, in my opinion."

"I was extremely pleased to have Mr. Circle visit this area and provide our farmers with new information and services otherwise unavailable."

"I think that he could undoubtedly enhance our on-going efforts with switchgrass."

Anyone interested in receiving information about the planting of the demonstration plots should contact Wallace at (434) 476-3066.

She also has contact information for Circle if area cattlemen or producers are interested in services provided by Circle and FDCE Enterprises.

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