

# Ethanol: A Switch From Corn?



Corn is still king of the ethanol industry, but switchgrass could also make for an effective biofuel crop.

PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

## Switchgrass Could Be A Top Biofuel Crop, But It Faces Challenges

BY RITA BRHEL  
P&D Correspondent

Though research demonstrates that switchgrass — a warm-season perennial grass, commonly found in pastures, that can grow as tall as 8 feet with ideal growing conditions — is superior to corn in ethanol production, corn remains the king of the ethanol industry.

The challenge for switchgrass's under-developed industry lies in the missing infrastructure — specifically, where to grow switchgrass as a crop without displacing already well-established corn acreage.

Researchers have a proposition for farmers: to grow switchgrass on marginal lands where corn doesn't produce well anyway.

"Switchgrass can overcome corn only at very low corn yields, so it has to be marginal land," said Keri Jacobs, agricultural economist at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. She spoke during a recent webinar hosted by the CenUSA Bioenergy Project.

"Making switchgrass profitable is a challenge," she added.

Despite the potential for switchgrass as a biofuel crop, any producers today — with this industry in its infancy — have to overcome the hurdles inherent with any developing industry, which consequently makes it difficult to continue developing the industry.

There are numerous fundamental challenges facing the switchgrass industry, according to Jacobs, including very few investments into the infrastructure and no policies in place to help shape the market. But she and other researchers have an idea of how the switchgrass industry can get a good foothold, even in an ethanol market dominated by highly profitable corn.

"Although switchgrass has some volatility, corn has much more volatility but the potential for much more upside," said F. John Hay, agricultural engineering educator at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, Neb., of the price potential of switchgrass versus corn.

## Veterans Day

# Farmer And Soldier Reflects On Freedom And His Love of Farming

BY LURA ROTI  
South Dakota Farmers Union

Taking a break from soybean harvest, Tyler Gerlach climbs into a John Deere 9430 and begins planting winter wheat. Well into the rhythm of planting, Gerlach, 31, begins visiting about the double life he leads — that of a Stickney farmer and the former Company Commander of the 1742nd Army National Guard Transportation Company.

As foreign as the two careers may seem from one another — Captain Gerlach was recently responsible for the lives of 160 National Guard soldiers whereas Farmer Gerlach, along with his brother, LaRon, are stewards of the land, raising 3,000 acres of corn, soybeans and winter wheat — Gerlach says there are many circumstances when his background in farming makes him a better soldier and being a soldier makes him a better farmer/business owner.

"Farmers learn not to make rash decisions. Just like planting corn. You don't plant when it's muddy because it won't grow as well. As a soldier I analyze everything and take all conditions into consideration before making a decision," says Gerlach, who returned from a nine-month deployment to Afghanistan



COURTESY PHOTO

Tyler Gerlach, 31, is a Stickney farmer and the former Company Commander of the 1742nd Army National Guard Transportation Company.

last October.

His years of leadership experience and training in the Army National Guard taught him the value of planning ahead. "In the military we plan for everything well ahead of time," he explains. "If something doesn't pan out, we don't get upset, we

move on to the next plan. Sounds a lot like farming doesn't it?"

### IN HIS BLOOD

Growing up, Gerlach spent his weekends and summers working on his Uncle Andy's farm. When it came time to begin thinking about what

he was going to do after high school, his uncle let him know that returning to farm was a viable option and encouraged him to study agriculture in college.

"I practically grew up on my uncle's farm. I love working outside. I also love the technical nature of farming. He and my Aunt Doris never had children, so they invested a lot of energy in my brother and me. They are like our second parents." It became his plan to attend South Dakota State University and major in Agriculture Systems Technology with a specialization in Agronomy.

To pay for college, Gerlach joined the Army National Guard in August 2001 — just a month before Sept. 11.

After high school, instead of spending his days on a college campus, Gerlach was attending Basic Training and then activated to Air Force Security at Joe Foss Field in Sioux Falls for two years. "Since the farm was so close, on my days off I was able to help on the farm and I took

a fair amount of leave during harvest."

From the beginning, Gerlach says he felt right at home in the National Guard. "Many things that make farming fun, I also found in the Guards," he explains, adding that his dad, Ronald, and brother, LaRon, also served in the Guards. "I developed a strong base of friends there."

When his deployment ended, Gerlach began classes at SDSU. As a student, he along with his girlfriend at the time, Vicki Schumacher, became involved in Collegiate Farmers Union. Both of their families had been active in Farmers Union and Vicki is a Torchbearer.

"Lobbying for the needs of the family farmer is something we both feel very strongly about," says Gerlach, who is President of Aurora County Farmers Union. "I am also grateful for all they do to support ethanol and renewable fuels. Farmers Union gives us a voice and the strength that can only be found within a

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