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Miscanthus for biofuels sprouts up in Kentucky

by Lisa Gibson

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Kentucky saw its first biofuel Miscanthus planting last week, a 300-acre field in a nursery that will yield rhizomes for 6,000 acres next year.

Midwestern Biofuels is looking for farmers in a 50-mile radius of South Shore, Ky.,—into Ohio and West Virginia—to grow the crop, which the company will pelletize and sell to biofuel producers. Miscanthus can be planted using the same equipment that's used for tobacco farming, an industry that has shrunk in Kentucky, according to Jeff Lowe, president and co-owner of Midwestern Biofuels. "Who better to plant it than the tobacco farmer?" he said. "They can use whatever equipment they already have and bring [the miscanthus] to our facility."

Lowe and co-owner Brandon Minix expect the first batch of the waterproof pellets to be ready in June. The project has been funded privately, but discussions with other potential investors are in the works, Lowe said. Midwestern Biofuels was established about nine months ago.

The company will begin producing about 3,000 pellets per month, Lowe said, working up to 6,000 per month by 2010 and upwards of 10,000 by the end of 2010. "It'll probably be one of the largest biomass producers in the country," he said. By 2011, the company plan to be operating on 40,000 acres, he added. Midwestern Biofuels will pay the farmers an established rate per acre and buy their yields.

The company also will experiment with growing switchgrass, black locus and willow trees for biomass. Crops will be planted on land previously mined for coal, beginning the last week in May, Lowe said. "We're moving pretty fast."

Lowe worked in the coal industry for more than 20 years and wanted to develop biomass that can be burned with coal without having to retrofit producers' facilities, he said. "When I saw what biomass will mean for the future, I wanted it to be handled like coal," he said. "It's been enjoyable coming to the green side."

Researchers from the University of Kentucky have been instrumental in the process, Lowe said. At full operation, the project will generate about 200 to 300 jobs, including farmers, truckers and plant operators, Lowe said.

Miscanthus is harvested every year in January, allowing for a freeze. It grows in poor soil, requires almost no fertilizer and is viable for at least 20 years. Biofuel from miscanthus has a heat yield of 8,000 British thermal units per pound.