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It remains to be seen what the US government will ultimately do to spur renewable energy, given America's complex and regional energy production

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August 6, 08

Ceres Creates High Yield Modified BioFuel Crop Seeds

California-based Ceres Inc., a plant genomics research firm, is making its first switchgrass seed varieties available for commercial sale this fall.

Ceres President and Chief Executive Officer Richard Hamilton said the company will market seed under its "Blade Energy Crops" trademark. The three varieties - Sunburst, Trailblazer and Blackwell – have been developed for use in the upper Midwest. Hamilton said he does not have an estimate as to how many acres of switchgrass Ceres would like to see planted next spring because "yield is variable" and is not the object at this point, although he does expect some crop to be harvested for commercial use next fall. At this point, Hamilton indicated the goal is to improve the plant's establishment as a commercial energy crop.



The company has yet to set a price for its switchgrass seed, but said the total cost to establish the crop will range from approximately \$150 to \$250 per acre. Because the crop is relatively unknown to farmers, Ceres will establish a grower's guide to aid in the first few years of planting and maintenance. According to Hamilton, once the crop is planted farmers can expect a 50 percent harvest the first year and a fully mature crop by the second season.

The focus on the economics is one of the reasons Ceres is leading with switchgrass and sorghum, rather than Miscanthus, which, as the University of Illinois study showed, is currently a higher yielding crop than switchgrass. But while switchgrass is a seeded crop, Miscanthus requires the planting of rhizomes—a slower, more labor-intensive, and hence more expensive, means of propagation. One of the projects Ceres is exploring is the creation of a seeded variety of Miscanthus to address those issues.

Ceres is working with various production partners to optimize the energy crop traits to mesh with their different production methodologies.

Hamilton roughly calculates that growing energy crops that can deliver 20t/acre on 60 million acres of non-crop or idle farmland could yield 120 billion gallons of ethanol (60M acres X 20t/ac X 100g/t = 120B gallons or 85% of current US gasoline demand—i.e., E85).

Ceres was founded in 1997 as a genomics research firm. The company applies technology used in the Human Genome Project to plants and is working to develop the "perfect" energy crop. Hamilton described the perfect energy crop as one that is a deep-rooted perennial, has optimized architecture (tall and thin), and can be easily propagated. In addition to switchgrass, the company is working on advancing sorghum, miscanthus and energy cane. Ceres also develops and supplies traits and technology for row crops.



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