

Sorghum eyed as a southern bioenergy crop

Sorghum is an ideal candidate because of its drought tolerance, adaptability to diverse growing conditions, low nitrogen fertilizer requirements, and high biomass (plant material) content, according to molecular biologist Scott Sattler and collaborator Jeff Pedersen with USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS). It also produces soluble sugar that can be converted to biofuel. Residual fibers left over from the juice extraction process also can be burned to generate electricity. Sattler and Pedersen's studies of sorghum are part of a larger effort by ARS—USDA's principal intramural scientific research agency—to answer a government mandate calling for the production of up to 36 billion gallons of biofuel by 2022. Approximately 15 billion gallons of that total will come from grain ethanol, with the remaining 21 billion gallons to come from other sources, or “feedstocks,” including sorghum, sugarcane, other grasses like switchgrass, and oilseed crops like rapeseed and soybean.

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