

Growing better poplars for biofuels

It took mankind millennia of painstaking trial and error to breed hardier, healthier food crops.

“We can’t wait that long to develop better crops for biofuels,” says Victor Busov, a plant geneticist at Michigan Technological University’s School of Forest Resources and Environmental Science. “We need to move faster to meet the needs of tomorrow, and the only way we can do that is through knowledge.”

So Busov is using some 21st century tools—the genome of the poplar tree and snippets of DNA known as activation tags—to identify the genes that make plants grow faster or change their chemical or physical properties. He recently received a \$1.1 million grant from the US Departments of Energy and Agriculture to analyze the genetic traits that affect the quality and yield of woody biomass from *Populus*, a species that includes poplar trees like aspens and cottonwoods. Michigan Tech will work with the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) on the 3-year study.

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