

NNFCC predicts a profitable future for dedicated crops

Energy crops need lower inputs and offer better returns on non-prime agricultural land, says Lucy Hopwood, the land and agricultural manager at the York-based National Non-Food Crops Centre (NNFCC).

And she believes that these crops can offer more stable prices and longer-term contracts than the traditional arable crops; they will also lead to enriched biodiversity on the farms where they are grown.

While some recent press reports about the demise of Bical and the apparent cooling of the Drax power station towards co-firing biomass might have left farmers feeling uneasy about future prospects for biomass, Ms Hopwood stressed that UK power stations were still committed to UK-grown energy crops.

"Drax, for example, has signed contracts with more than 100 growers



Left: SRC woodchip ready for market. Background: A crop of miscanthus growing in England

and producers of biomass fuel in the past year and it is still looking to sign up more people willing to grow energy crops for fuel," she said.

Dedicated biomass was particularly good for large-scale energy suppliers because they received an extra half ROC (Renewable Obligation Certificate).

"On a smaller scale, the proposed Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme, due to come into operation in Britain next April, will provide owners of new biomass boilers with

between 1.6 and 9p per kWh of heat generated, depending on the size of their installation and attract even more people to biomass, thus expanding the market for growers," said Ms Hopwood, who has a degree in agriculture and crop management from Harper Adams and is a member of the British Institute of Agricultural Consultants (BIAC).

She also has several years of practical experience in crop production and agriculture and can advise growers on cropping options and opportunities for adding value.

The NNFCC is the UK's national centre for renewable fuels, materials and technologies and provides independent information and advice to agriculture, academia, government, industry and the public. ■

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Rise in grants for energy growers

The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) has stepped up its promotion of the Energy Crops Scheme (ECS), and has now confirmed an increase in grant from 40% to 50% of costs in England.

The scheme aims to increase the amount of energy crops grown in England, by offering grants to farmers for the establishment of miscanthus and short rotation coppice, through the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE).

Given the growing strategic importance of a domestic biomass energy supply in its Renewable

Energy Strategy, the DECC has been promoting the ECS through advertisements in the farming press, distribution of information leaflets and a programme of farm demonstration days earlier this year.

After seeking European Commission approval to increase the grant from 40% to 50% of actual costs, DECC confirmed it would apply from January 1, 2010 onwards and Natural England said it was continuing to process as many applications as possible for the 2010 season.

The grants will be available until 2013, at least, and farmers can apply for grants for 2011 now.

The scheme is aimed at farmers who want to grow wood energy crops such as short-rotation coppice (SRC), or miscanthus (a tall woody grass).

It points out that the SRC is planted in the spring and the first harvest is four years later, followed by one every three years.

Miscanthus is also planted in the spring and the first harvest comes after the second year and then every following year.

The crop is harvested in the winter and, like SRC, it can be grown on land that offers average, or lower than average arable yields. ■