

New USU Extension Center for Biofuels Approved

US - The Utah State University Board of Trustees approved the new USU Extension Center for Agronomic and Woody Biofuels. The center will provide the organizational structure to support current research and Extension activities related to producing and using plants for food, fuel, feed, fiber and reclamation, known as agronomic science and technology.

Research at the center will support crops and their conversion to biofuels in Utah, the region and the nation. The creation of the new center requires no new facilities, equipment or personnel.

"As the world's attention has shifted to alternative and renewable sources of energy, USU Extension and our faculty partners in the Colleges of Agriculture and Natural Resources have begun to look at oilseed crops and woody biomass that might be converted into biofuels or electrical energy," said Charles W. Gay, associate vice president and associate director for USU Extension. "This new center will provide the point of focus we need to move forward."

According to Dallas Hanks, USU Extension bioenergy agronomist and leader of the center's efforts, USU has become the frontrunner in the United States in developing the agronomic practices for the production of oilseed crops for biofuels in arid and semi-arid systems, particularly on non-traditional lands such as highway rights of way, airports and military bases.

"USU is also providing leadership for state and federal agencies in the development of processes to produce biofuels from woody biomass, which includes limbs, tops, needles, leaves and other woody parts, grown in a forest, woodland or rangeland environment, that are the by-products of forest management," Mr Hanks said. "All these activities are funded extramurally and involve students and faculty. The new center will help increase awareness, enhance marketing and allow increased collaboration and partnership development."

The agronomic and tree crops focus of the center will complement current work being conducted by the USU College of Engineering with its partners on algae production for biofuels purposes.

In addition to woody biomass research, the new center will be particularly beneficial to the FreeWays to Fuel project, of which Hanks is the national director. It is estimated that there are 10 million available acres nationally that are located on non-traditional agronomic sites such as rights of way on freeways, airports, military installations, utility areas and railroads. These sites have been underutilized for biofuel crop production and require significant maintenance costs.

Mr Hanks said the FreeWays to Fuel project investigates the planting, growing and harvesting methods to rapidly adapt and economically grow oilseed crops in these areas. The process has the potential to generate four positive outcomes: to produce sustainable fuels from idle areas that are costly to maintain, to provide a mechanism to economically control weeds in these areas, to provide support to the local economy by providing jobs and relatively inexpensive fuels and to provide a template/screening process for all national state departments of transportation to follow.

"We are pleased with the USU Board of Trustees designation of the new center," Mr Hanks said. "It will provide the needed structure to continue the great work that USU is pioneering in agronomic and woody biofuels research."

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