

New Eastern Iowa Airport miscanthus crop will fuel University of Iowa power plant

Miscanthus also will reduce nutrient runoff

By George C. Ford, The Gazette

Photos



Cedar Rapids Mayor Ron Corbett answers questions during a planting of Miscanthus at a field at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Friday, May 15, 2015. Miscanthus, a deep-rooted perennial grass is being planted on 65 acres of farmland at the airport to be harvested and used as a biofuel for the University of Iowa's power plant. (Adam Wesley/The Gazette)

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Planting of miscanthus, a perennial grass that will be burned as a fuel by the University of Iowa power plant, has begun on 65 acres of low performing farmland at The Eastern Iowa Airport.

The crop will grow to an annual height of between 8 and 12 feet every year for 15 to 20 years, according to Dan Black, a Johnson County farmer who works part time for Repeve Renewables of Greensboro, N.C. Black, who has a 14-acre plot of miscanthus west of Iowa City, said the crop was

chosen for several reasons.

“Miscanthus grass is a sterile, non-invasive variety that does not produce any seed, so it will not attract birds,” Black said. “It will produce between 9 and 12 tons per acre at maturity.

“The higher yield will add to the economic viability of the project.”

Donald Swanson, airport director of finance and administration, said growing miscanthus will slightly reduce farm income for the airport initially. He said the value of the crop may ultimately be roughly equal to what was generated by corn or soybeans on the low performing land.

The Eastern Iowa Airport is one of the largest farmers in Linn County with more than 2,000 acres of farmland that it leases to five local farmers who grow corn and soybeans.

The airport’s farmland is located at the top of the watersheds for the Cedar and Iowa rivers. Cedar Rapids Mayor Ron Corbett said the planting of miscanthus fits well with the overall efforts the city is taking to improve water quality.

“We have formed the Middle Cedar Partnership Project to work with local conservation partners, farmers, and landowners north of Cedar Rapids to install best management practices to help improve the Cedar River Watershed and water quality in Cedar Rapids,” Corbett said. “The airport projects address our responsibility to those communities further down the Cedar and Iowa rivers.”

Ingrid Gronstal Anderson, UI environmental compliance specialist, said burning miscanthus as a power plant fuel will help the university meet a long-term goal.

“We have a goal to have 40 percent of our energy come from renewable sources by 2020,” Anderson said. “This particular crop takes three years to establish.”

The planting of miscanthus is the first step in a twofold effort to reduce nutrient runoff and produce renewable resources.

Later this month, a 100-acre section of land will be divided into a test field and a control field with measurement tools put in place to test the runoff from each field. Approximately 10 percent of the test field will be planted with native prairie strips using seed supplied by Pheasants Forever.