



Biofuels May Lead to Invasive Species

As Canada, the US, and other countries look to crops as future sources of energy, some researchers are calling for caution, saying there's a chance that biofuel crops can be invasive species. The scientists argue that before these crops are widely planted, further studies of biofuel crops are needed. Biofuels (derived from processing crops) are looked at by many environmentalists as a way to use less non-renewable oil or gas.

“Most of the qualities that are great for biofuel crops – no known pests or diseases, rapid growth, low water-use – are red flags for invasion biologists ... We want to start a dialog and approach the question of biofuels systematically,” said one scientist.

Some crops have already become invasive species in the US. Researchers cite the case of Johnson grass which was introduced as a forage grass and has become an invasive weed in many US states. This grass has caused \$30 million annually in losses for cotton and soybean crops in just three US states. One proposed crop can grow up to eight feet in six weeks. “Plants like these, particularly grasses, have great potential from an energy standpoint, but the benefits need to be balanced with the costs,” said a researcher.

A native species also can become invasive through alterations to the environment, for example: the removal of oak and chestnut trees along much of the east coast of North America led to sugar maples becoming invasive in some areas. Invasive species alter ecosystems in ways that can cause both ecological and economic harm.

Researchers investigating biofuels tend to be engineering or agricultural specialists who are looking at maximizing crop size. Researchers want to see ecologists at the table negotiating with these researchers so that their ‘invasiveness’ can be considered in the planning.

To make their point, scientists talked about one case where scientists were examining a plant to be used for absorbing toxic metals at polluted sites, while other scientists were working on a process for the biological control of the same plant - one that they considered to be an invasive species!

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