

# Organizing for a Biomass Future

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*“Opportunity is missed by most because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.”*

Thomas A. Edison

It sounds like “opportunity” for Mr. Edison looked a lot like one of my fellow growers coming in from his or her field or machine shop after a long day (or night during harvest). Opportunity and hard work are no strangers to farmers because this is what we do every day to provide for our families and produce the safest and most abundant food supply in the world, both for domestic and overseas consumers.

The NAWG Board of Directors unanimously adopted a resolution at its October meeting directing NAWG to expand its advocacy mandate to include the representation of biomass energy crop growers. I think the reason our Board members adopted this direction by a unanimous vote is that they saw a familiar sight dressed in overalls walking up the gravel drive to the farmyard: opportunity.

A recent USDA/DOE study identified 1.3 billion tons of agriculture residue and dedicated crops that could be converted into cellulose ethanol on an annual sustainable basis. At the current market rate of \$15 per ton for agricultural residues like wheat straw, a conservative allocation of that 1.3 billion tons to growers of wheat and dedicated energy crops could result in \$13 to \$21 billion in additional farm income. By comparison, the current value of the entire corn crop is about \$20 billion and the value of the wheat crop is about \$7 billion.

Currently, wheat growers can generally realize anywhere from a ton to two tons of straw per acre, which, at the market rate of \$15 per ton, means an additional \$15 to \$30 per acre in the windrow, with no baling or any further work required on the part of the farmer.

The economics of switchgrass are less clear because both the switchgrass-producing industry and the cellulosic ethanol industry that will purchase switchgrass are in their infant stages. However, switchgrass biomass yields currently run from two to five tons per acre or, at the market rate of \$15 per ton, \$30 to \$75 per acre in the windrow. Expected future advancements in the genetics of switchgrass could influence yields and produce an even more favorable situation.

Are these “blue sky” or pipedream expectations? Not if we put our organizational minds and weight behind the effort. Our friends both in Congress and in the renewable fuel industry are looking for an organization such as NAWG to step in and take up this cause. We at NAWG are working with the state wheat growers associations to provide additional “how to” information, including material about soil and agronomy, economic and organizational questions.

This could be a great transitional movement in the history of agriculture. We need your support to help us lead the way.