

Is Biofuel Production Fueling A Weed Invasion?

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : April 13, 2012 at 4:58 am

The term "spring planting" takes on a whole new meaning when the crop is a biofuel. While it may finally put some types of weeds to a productive use, [a report](#) from the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) cites the need for careful selection and monitoring of the crops being grown for energy production. In states with warmer climates, it says some are overtaking native species.

It hasn't happened in the Northwest, although the fast-growing giant reed has been planted for biofuel use in the Columbia Gorge near Boardman, Oregon. At Washington State University, ecology professor Dr. Richard Mack describes it as an ornamental grass that, in some areas, has become a real nuisance.

Given the biology of this grass, it's a species that should be viewed very cautiously in that regard. It's easy to envision a situation where it's transported out of an area or washes off a site, down a ditch, gets established on its own and then, it's literally off and running. - Dr. Richard MackDr. Mack says he isn't ruling out any plant species for biofuel potential, as long as its environmental impact is evaluated as thoroughly as its economic impact.

Patty Glick, senior global warming specialist in the NWF Northwest regional office, says there are ways to prevent invasive species from taking over, so that biofuel producers won't cause environmental harm or cost taxpayers money.

"State and federal governments need to implement rigorous monitoring, as well as early detection and rapid response protocols. And these should be paid for by the bioenergy feedstock producers themselves."

Dr. Mack says monitoring efforts are hit-and-miss, depending on whether states have seen problems. He cautions that the rush to develop this new industry shouldn't overshadow the rest of the picture.

"At the same time, we have to really ask ourselves, 'Are there any downside risks to introducing these species?' And that has to be evaluated pretty carefully, and often has to be done in an experimental setting - which means it takes time."

The report also suggests native plants, that aren't genetically engineered, be used for bioenergy production. And it explores the idea of harvesting invasive weeds where they're already a problem, to reduce their impact while also providing biomass.

The report, "Growing Risk," is online at www.nwf.org/growingrisk.