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UT Poised To Help Nation Meet Energy Goals

As one of five regional centers for the federally funded Sun Grant Initiative, the University of Tennessee is poised to help the nation meet President George W. Bush's ambitious energy goals.

In his State of the Union address President Bush included a challenging goal: "to replace more than 75 percent of our oil imports from the Middle East by 2025." As a critical component of his proposal, he pledged support for "additional research in cutting-edge methods of producing ethanol, not just from corn but from wood chips and stalks or switchgrass." The Sun Grant Initiative, developed by a national network of land-grant universities, is working to make that goal a reality.

"Working closely with farmers, industry, local community leaders and public interest groups, we believe that the efforts of the Sun Grant Initiative, including those led by the University of Tennessee, will make crucial contributions toward meeting the President's challenge for energy independence," responds Buddy Mitchell, UT interim vice president for agriculture. UT is one of five land-grant universities chosen in 2005 as a regional center for Sun Grant Initiative research.

With help from research and development, US farmers have excelled in establishing corn and ethanol as a reliable domestic source of fuel over the past several decades. Now, universities and federal laboratories are developing new technologies for using agricultural wastes, crop residues, and new dedicated crops for the production of bioenergy. Native grasses such as switchgrass and fast-growing trees, such as hybrid poplars, promise to be even more useful and efficient as sources of biomass energy. Producing fuels from these US-grown fibers will be an essential component of the nation's "next generation" energy technology.

"We are already proceeding with a \$1 million effort to study the production of switchgrass and alternatives for converting its stored solar energy into useful fuel," said Dr. Thomas Klindt, interim dean of the Tennessee Agricultural Experiment Station.

"We recently appointed Dr. Tim Rials, director of the Tennessee Forest Products Center, to also oversee our Sun Grant efforts," Klindt said. "Dr. Rials' experience with state and regional industry will be directly applicable to converting biomass to alternative uses, including fuels."

"The President's goals are a 'win-win' for everyone," adds Mitchell. "Investing in bioenergy research and education supports American farms, ranches and forests, creates jobs in rural communities, and benefits the environment."

Mitchell agrees that real investments must be made now. "We will need time to get new bioenergy technologies fully operational to meet the President's challenge by 2025," he said.

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On the Web at <http://sungrant.tennessee.edu/>

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