

Money-Making Ideas To Boost Farm Income



With an estimated 62,000 cows and calves in Bates' county, there's no shortage of twine.



Bates supplies her customers with 1-ton grain totes to store their twine. The big bags make it easier for her to pick up the twine and help keep the twine cleaner.

Twine Lady Turns Problem Into Profit

Sarah Bates used to weave horse halters out of plastic twine. Now she turns tons of twine into a profit for herself, at the same time cleaning up a big problem for area cattlemen.

"It's against the rules to burn plastic in Oregon, but there hasn't been a market for used twine because of the dirt and hay mixed in with it," explains Bates. "I found a plastic recycler that will take it as is."

Bates supplies her customers with 1-ton grain totes or 'super bags' to store their twine. She suggests they hang them on a fence near the cattle and, when done feeding, toss in the twine. The bags make it easier for her to pick up the twine and help keep the twine cleaner.

"Less contamination means more profit, and a better chance that I can stay in business and provide this ser-

vice," she notes.

One thing she isn't worried about is running out of twine. She estimates a cow will eat about three tons of hay a year with each ton generating about 2 lbs. of twine. At 6 lbs. of twine per animal per year and an estimated 62,000 cows and calves in her county, there is no shortage of twine. That's not counting the other agricultural plastic she is collecting like bags and plant row covers and pots.

Finding a company that would accept agricultural plastic was the hard part. Agri-Plas, Inc. of Brooks, Oregon, turns used plastic into pellets or, in the case of twine, shreds it. The innovative company is also developing a process that will turn used plastic back into a petroleum product that can be refined like crude oil is today.

Bates is excited about providing her free service to area farmers and ranchers. With the purchase of a heavy-duty compacter/baler, she is turning the twine into 1,000-lb. bales, which she can more easily transport to Agri-Plas.

Bates has been collecting twine and other plastic for 10 months.

"I got the idea when I saw a big pile of twine and thought there had to be a way to use it," she recalls.

Bates is very confident of her future and says she would be glad to help others considering the same type of business. She is currently available as a consultant.

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With the help of a heavy duty compacter, Sarah Bates turns twine into 1,000-lb. bales which she sells to a plastic recycler.

Winter "Weed" Promises Big Double-Crop Dollars

Midwestern farmers could make as much as \$175 an acre by double-cropping field pennycress. The winter annual weed from the mustard family shows promise as a biofuels crop with twice as much oil content per lb. as soybeans. Best of all, for crop producers farming in the area between Interstate highways I-70 and I-80, it can be planted after corn comes out in early October and harvested in May before soybeans have to be planted.

"This will be my third planting of a small plot on my farm," says Peter Johnsen, chief technology officer, Biofuels Manufacturers of Illinois (BMI). "Last year I did 6 acres and this year will do as many as 25 acres. We have commitments from other farmers for plantings ranging from 5 acres to 200."

Johnsen says he is still learning what the best seeding rate and plant density are for the crop. Yields last year ran from 800 lbs. an acre with low planting densities to 2,100 lbs. per acre at higher seeding rates.

With 400,000 seeds per lb., it takes 4 to 5 lbs. of seed to get 750,000 to a million plants per acre. The question of how much to plant for maximum production is yet to be answered.

"We're still learning how to grow the crop," says Johnsen. "We are trying to narrow in on what the sweet spot is for planting rates. We thought some practices would produce better yields, and they did, but we still don't know what optimum production will be."

BMI is giving away seed to interested farmers and also seeking financing for a new crushing plant. Johnsen says the firm expects to break ground on a plant in 2010. Farmers are not being asked to help fund the plant, as was the case with many ethanol and biodiesel plants. Instead, the company is encouraging growers to join a grower-owned group that will contract for production, collect the crop and then sell it to BMI.

"Growing a new crop is risky enough without the grower taking on the burden of the processing plant, too," says Johnsen. "We hope to develop the demand first and then offer growers contracts to grow it."

Johnsen projects the initial plant will use seed from about half a million acres. Illinois alone has enough soybean acres that if pennycress were double-cropped on all of them, the state would need 18 plants.

"There's tremendous potential for this crop from Ohio to Nebraska in the I-70 to I-80 band," he says.

Eventually, varieties of pennycress may be developed for areas to the north and south. The weed can be found from Florida to Alaska, but shifts from a winter annual to a spring emerging weed as it moves north. Johnsen suggests that its relative, camelina, may be a better choice in northern areas.

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Field pennycress, a winter annual weed, shows promise as a biofuels crop.



Promoters say pennycress has twice as much oil content per pound as soybeans.