



Weeds Won't Wait: Don't Hesitate

**For Immediate Release
November 26, 2007**

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BIOFUEL CROPS: PANACEA OR PANDORA'S BOX?

(LAWRENCE, Kan.) — It's a Cinderella story. Weeds, scorned and trod on for years and persistently excluded from the manicured gardens and uniform crops of respectable horticultural and agricultural society are fast becoming the darlings of a burgeoning biofuel industry. But not all fairytales have a happy ending.

Economic, environmental and political threats that surround traditional fuel production and consumption have major oil companies investing in biofuel crop development. Like ethanol, which in the U.S. mainly uses fermented sugar derived from corn, carbons can be extracted from a variety of plants to produce fuel. With crude oil trading at record prices and ethanol costing even more, the lure of environmentally friendly, low cost biofuels rendered from low maintenance plants is undeniable.

While this may seem like a win-win situation, there is one major flaw that should not be overlooked. "Many of the plants currently targeted for possible biofuel production are invasive in nature if they escape the cultivated environs in which they are contained," says Jodie Holt, Professor and Chair of the Department of Botany and Plant Sciences at the University of California Riverside.

"Unfortunately, those same characteristics that make invasive plants attractive—rapid growth rates, high yield, low water and maintenance requirements, and an ability to grow even in undesirable soil—also makes them an imposing threat if they escape," says Holt.

Some of the invasive plants currently under consideration for biofuel production are jatropha, (*Jatropha* spp.), reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), giant reed (*Arundo donax*) and Chinese tallowtree (*Sapium sebiferum*). All of these are known invasives in the United States.

Holt recently coauthored the Weed Science Society of America white paper, "Biofuels and Invasive Plant Species," which outlines the risks associated with cultivating invasive plants for biofuel crops. The paper points out that any potential crop should first be assessed for environmental impact in the event of an outbreak and that any plants grown as crops should not be capable of surviving on their own outside of cultivation. The risks are just too great.

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BIOFUEL PLANTS COULD BE INVASIVE / ADD ONE

The impact of invasive plants on the nation's agriculture, water quality, wildlife and recreation already costs the U.S. an estimated \$34.7 billion annually, according to a recent Cornell University report. "With large crops of invasive species deliberately grown, the effects could be far reaching if they escape controlled cultivation," says Holt. "Seeds can easily be dispersed by the wind, humans or animals at various points of crop production, such as during planting, harvesting and transport," says Holt.

The potentially negative impact of invasive plants shouldn't be taken lightly in the quest to find a magic bullet to solve our energy consumption needs.

For more information about invasive weeds, contact Lee VanWychen, Director of Science Policy for the Weed Science Society of America, at (202) 408-5388 or visit www.wssa.net.

About the Weed Science Society of America

The Weed Science Society of America, a non-profit professional society, was founded in 1956 to encourage and promote the development of knowledge concerning weeds and their impact on the environment. The Weed Science Society of America, promotes research, education and extension outreach activities related to weeds; provides science-based information to the public and policy makers; and fosters awareness of weeds and their impacts on managed and natural ecosystems. For more information, visit www.wssa.net.

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