

Willow Research Program at the University of Saskatchewan

Ryan Hangs¹, Ken Van Rees¹, Nicolas Bélanger¹, Richard Farrell¹, Graham Scoles², Vladimir Vujanovic³ and Robert Grant⁴

¹Department of Soil Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A2, Canada; ²Department of Plant Sciences, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A2, Canada; ³Department of Applied Microbiology and Food Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A2, Canada; ⁴Department of Renewable Resources, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2H1, Canada

INTRODUCTION

- The Saskatchewan government has committed to deriving one-third of its electricity from renewable energy sources by 2030 and short-rotation woody crops (SRWC) will play a key role in meeting this target. Additionally, there is increased interest from industry in using SRWC biomass as a feedstock for ethanol production.
- Consequently, in 2005 the provincial government proposed an ambitious 1.6 million-hectare (i.e., 10 per cent of the province's arable land) afforestation initiative, with the intention of addressing not only the expected increased demand for woody biomass as differential markets develop, but also to mitigate the increasingly unfavourable agricultural sector within the province.
- The establishment of SRWC, such as willow, therefore, represents a legitimate option for diversifying farmers trying to maintain an economically viable operation in the face of historically decreasing commodity prices, along with increasing input and transportation costs, especially in the northern regions where annual crops are grown on marginal agricultural soils.
- Before there is widespread incorporation of willow into Saskatchewan agroforestry practices, however, a clear economic advantage for producers to grow willow must become apparent. In order to achieve this goal, a number of important agronomic, economic, and environmental questions need to be addressed, from both operational and empirical perspectives, which will be the focus of the willow research program at the University of Saskatchewan over the next several years.

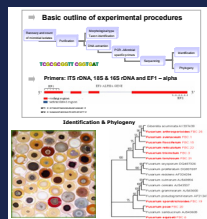
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does a three-year rotation of high density willow affect biogeochemical cycling?



Employing suction lysimeters and litter traps to measure nutrient cycling within SRWC plantations.

Which diseases and pests within willow age sequences affect above- and below-ground biomass production?



Molecular diagnostics of plant diseases using culture-dependent and -independent PCR-based approaches.

Does intercropping willow with caragana (i.e., N-fixer) improve soil nutrient availability within these plantations?

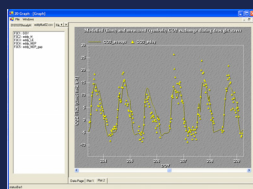


Caragana arborescens (Siberian Poashrub or Caragana) is a popular shelterbelt species.



Harvesting above-ground biomass and estimating below-ground root growth and biomass using minirhizotrons and soil cores.

How much carbon is sequestered above- and below-ground in these SRWC plantations using the Canadian Forest Service's Carbon Budget Model (CBM-CFS3) and using the ECOSYS model, what are the constraints for carbon accumulation?



Using the ECOSYS modeling program to construct C budgets for willow plantations.



Four willow plantations will be established on agricultural land throughout Saskatchewan.



Winter damage observed with the clone "Charlie".

Which willow clones demonstrate the best survival and growth characteristics and what is the effect of varying soil type and environmental gradient on willow biomass yield?



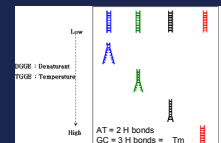
Applying fertilizer N to increase SRWC plantation productivity.

Which key cultural practices (and their associated costs) are required for realizing optimal high density willow plantation establishment and productivity?

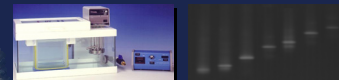


Measuring N₂O and CO₂ fluxes using non-steady state vented chambers.

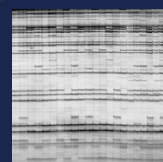
What are the rates of greenhouse gas emissions from soil in willow and willow/caragana plantations following various cultivation practices?



What are the rhizosphere microbial communities and their functional implications in disease development or resistance of short-rotation willow?



Analysis of rhizosphere microbial communities by PCR-DGGE.



Example of a molecular fingerprint (i.e., barley) produced using the multi-band AFLP technique.

Which molecular techniques could be effectively used to explicitly distinguish among the currently available willow clones for developing a molecular fingerprint library?

EXPECTED KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

This work will help to fill the current knowledge gap regarding cultivating short-rotation willow plantations in the prairie provinces and, therefore, should benefit farmers looking to diversify their production system, the renewable energy industry looking for reliable biomass feedstock, and government policy makers developing strategies to meet Canada's Kyoto commitments.