Who's interested in growing energy crops in the UK?

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The energy crops industry in the UK has been very slow at getting a foothold and there are still only around 10,000 hectares of woody energy crops planted. So why is there so little action on the ground? Unfortunately, many of the "incentives" offered by the Government do not directly benefit growers and too few have been persuaded to take the risk on growing these crops. This paper will briefly explore what farmers need to make them more interested in planting willow and poplar for both power and heat markets.

Despite the low take up by farmers a great deal of interest is being shown by industrial land owners (including waste management companies, water and sewage treatment companies, airports, aggregates companies and breweries). In many cases energy cops offer a suitable land use for brown earth sites and economic alternatives to industrial treatment of effluents. Furthermore, when the fuel produced from these crops is used in biomass boilers they have the fringe benefits of reducing carbon emissions and helping ensure long term security of supply. If more industrial land owners are attracted to growing these crops then there will be a need for more investment in infrastructure and more local contractors offering services. This will bring competition and make the venture less risky for other growers, leading to an increase in planting.

However, for this to happen , more projects need to get beyond the feasibility study stage and into practical deployment. Nevertheless, many environmental applications are constrained by planning and consents. This is because they are often seen as bespoke solutions and planners need to be certain that the use of the crop will not have detrimental side effects. In addition, because of the high establishment costs project developers need to be certain that their crop will be able to thrive on challenging land and be able to deal with complex cocktails of chemicals in waste water, leachate and effluents from industrial processes.

The paper will briefly identify areas in which scientists could provide support to the industry in order for more of these projects to be implemented and as a result stimulate the energy crops sector to meet renewable energy targets and carbon reduction targets in the UK and elsewhere.