Switchgrass Biomass Yield and Fertilizer Requirements by Month of Harvest: Economic Consequences of Nutrient Translocation and Remobilization

Amadou Gouzaye, F.M. Epplin, B.W. Brorsen, Y. Wu, and S.O. Makaju

Amadou Gouzaye, F.M. Epplin and B.W. Brorsen are Ph.D. Student, Professor and Jean & Patsy Neustadt Chair, Regents Professor and A.J. and Susan Jacques Chair in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater Oklahoma, 74078, (405)-744-6156, amadou.gouzaye@okstate.edu, Y. Wu and S.O. Makaju are Associate Professor and Ph.D. Student in the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater Oklahoma, 74078.


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Abstract:

If switchgrass harvest is delayed until after senescence, some nutrients will translocate to the plant’s crown and roots. Biomass yield and fertilizer requirements depend on harvest date. The objective is to determine switchgrass biomass yield, nutrient concentration in biomass, fertilizer requirements, and expected production cost by month of harvest.

Key words: biomass, cost, feedstock, harvest month, nutrient remobilization, switchgrass, translocate
INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Energy’s (2011) 21 Billion-Ton Update reported that 40 to 60 million acres of U.S. cropland and pasture could be converted to produce dedicated energy crops. Early studies on switchgrass production as feedstock for a bioenergy have reported yield decrease associated with delaying harvest past senescence. In most prior studies switchgrass is assumed to be harvested during a narrow time frame after maturity when maximum dry matter yield can be achieved. In the southern plains of the United States the switchgrass harvest window could extend over many months. With an extended harvest window, switchgrass biomass could be delivered just in time to reduce harvest and storage cost. However, with an extended harvest window expected harvestable yield and expected fertilization requirement may differ depending on the month of harvest.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to determine switchgrass biomass yield and fertilizer requirements by month of harvest and to determine the expected cost of providing a flow of biomass to a bioenergy from an extended harvest period relative to a narrow harvest window.

DATA

Data were produced in a split plot randomized complete block field experiment with six replications over three production seasons from 2007 to 2010. The experiment was conducted at the Oklahoma State University experiment station in Stillwater, OK (36°57.98’ N 97°26’ W). Treatments on the established stand of lowland switchgrass consisted of harvest month (Nov, Dec, Jan, Feb, Mar). The experiment produced biomass yield and biomass nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) concentration by month. Statistical methods were used to determine the biomass yield and nutrients content of the biomass as a function of harvest date. Point estimates from these regressions were used to prepare standard enterprise budgets for each harvest month to determine the economic consequences of an extended harvest window on feedstock production cost.

METHODS

A biomass yield response to harvest date function was estimated.

\[ y_{\text{yield}} = a_0 + a_1 \times \text{date} + a_2 \times \text{date}^2 + a_3 \times \text{date}^3 + b_0 + b_1 \times \text{year} + \epsilon \]

where \( y \) is the yield, date is the harvest date with July 1 = 1, \( \theta \) and \( \phi \) are random effects of year and replication, respectively.

Levels of P and K in the harvested material was also estimated at harvest date.

\[ P = f(\text{harvest date}) \]

\[ K = f(\text{harvest date}) \]

Points estimates from equations (1) to (3) were used to prepare enterprise budgets for each harvest month following Turhollow and Epplin (2012) and Griffith et al. (2010).

// Budgeted fertilizer costs were based on estimates of nutrients removed in harvested material.

RESULTS

Table 1. Switchgrass Yield Response to Harvest Date (Mg. ha\(^{-1}\))

| Effect | Estimate | Standard Error | Pr > |t |
|--------|----------|----------------|--------|
| Intercept | -56.0761 | 27.9432 | 0.1826 |
| Date | 0.8990 | 0.4134 | 0.0327 |
| Date2 | -0.0042 | 0.0019 | 0.0386 |
| Date3 | 6.32E-06 | 3.14E-06 | 0.0471 |

- The linear, quadratic and cubic polynomial terms were all significant in the yield equation
- Switchgrass biomass harvestable yield differs across harvest month
- Harvestable yield declines from early to late winter (Figure 1)
- Significant yield difference across years
- Figure 1 presents expected yield and expected levels of P and K removal in biomass across harvest month
- Delaying harvest results in a decline in nutrient concentration in biomass confirming nutrient translocation from above ground biomass to the plants crowns and rhizomes.

Table 2. Nutrients in Harvested Biomass by Harvest Month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>P(_{\text{av}}) (Kg.ha(^{-1}))</th>
<th>K(_{\text{av}}) (Kg.ha(^{-1}))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Because nutrients translocate after senescence, fertilization requirements differ depending on previous year harvest date.

Table 3. Cost to Deliver Switchgrass by Harvest Month ($ Mg\(^{-1}\))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>High cost</th>
<th>Low cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: High and Low cost scenarios are based on different assumptions on establishment, transportation, and land lease costs.

CONCLUSIONS

- Switchgrass growth continues through December for some years
- Yield declines as harvest is delayed for late winter
- Nutrient translocation continues throughout the winter

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REFERENCES


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Amadou Gouzaye1, F.M. Epplin1, B.W. Broersen1, Y. Wu3, and S.O. Makaju2

1 Department of Agricultural Economics, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater Oklahoma, 74078.
2 Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater Oklahoma, 74078

Phone Number: (405) 744-5607, by Hatch grant number H-2854, by the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, and by the Jean and Patri Neustadt Chair. Support does not constitute an endorsement of the findings expressed.