

Introduction to Renewables - Biomass

Captured solar energy from biological systems currently plays a large role in human society through agriculture and small-scale domestic use. Expanding the use of biomass for large-scale energy services could help reduce the greenhouse gas intensity of the energy system. Because photosynthesis captures CO₂ from the air, the resulting carbon-based feedstock can be processed and utilized in a similar manner to fossil fuels with lower net emissions of CO₂.

Biomass energy conversion could take advantage of many existing waste streams, but would also likely involve the cultivation and conversion of dedicated energy crops. The naturally low efficiency conversion of solar energy to biomass leads to large requirements of land, water and nutrients. Lifecycle cost, energy, and greenhouse gas emission considerations such as fertilizer production, harvesting, and feedstock transportation are barriers to the widespread use of energy crops. Increases in the yield of energy crops for given energy, water, and nutrient inputs would decrease the associated lifecycle costs. Research utilizing modern biotechnology could increase efficiency with respect to each of these inputs.

Research enabling more efficient and lower cost conversion methods could also benefit biomass energy. Thermochemical conversion systems designed for fossil fuels could be adapted to accommodate biomass feedstock or new systems designed to take advantage of the unique properties of biomass could be explored. Biological conversion systems have the potential for high efficiency and low cost as our understanding and control of these organisms increase.

GCEP has two projects in the area of biomass energy. Professor Sherlock is developing hybrid yeast strains for enhanced ethanol production from biomass. The yeast species will be heat and ethanol tolerant and able to utilize the cellulosic portions of biomass feedstocks. Professor Somerville is working toward increasing the amount of cellulose accumulation in plants by altering gene expression. These plants will have a higher percentage of cells with a secondary cell wall. Increased cellulose production could increase the yield of energy crops without requiring additional nutrients.