



## Sweet Briar to sell warm-season grasses for biofuel

April 10, 2014

Sweet Briar College announced on Tuesday that it has entered into an agreement with FDC Enterprises Grassland Services to convert approximately 250 acres of its hayfields to native warm-season grasses with perennial borders. The grasses will be sold as biofuel, with the borders becoming pollinator habitat.



Rolling hills, woods and fields surround Sweet Briar's main campus.

“The College has taken another step forward in our environmental stewardship with this endeavor,” said vice president for finance and administration Scott Shank. “Not only will we be growing a biofuel to be used as a green energy source, the warm-season grasses also enhance carbon sequestration through greater root production.”

Sweet Briar students will also benefit from the collaboration.

“The project has the potential to provide substantial educational opportunities for us in the areas of biology, chemistry, environmental studies, engineering and perhaps others,” said Doris McConnell Duberg Professor of Ecology Linda Fink.

Shank agrees that research is a central component.

“The intent of this project is to study the potential positive impacts of establishing pollinator-attractant vegetative species adjacent to perennial energy crop fields,” he said.

About 61 species of wildflowers, including three types of milkweed, will be planted on campus.

Members of the Campus Environment Committee, which includes Shank and Fink, discussed the

agreement with representatives from the environmental studies department and the Riding Program. At the request of Fink and riding director Mimi Wroten, some fields will be excluded for either riding or research purposes, Shank said.

The agreement is part of a Conservation Innovation Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Resources Conservation Service to FDC. The initial cost of planting the fields will be covered by the grant, and FDC Enterprises will provide all the labor and equipment for both planting and harvesting the grasses.

According to Shank, the first phase of the project will begin within the next few weeks. While the research will be performed over a three-year period, Sweet Briar is entering into a “longer-term arrangement to manage and harvest the warm-season grasses to be sold in Virginia as bio fuel under a revenue-sharing agreement,” Shank said.

“Overall, this opportunity will not generate a large sum of revenue. However, it will generate substantially more than our former leases with local farmers.”

– **Janika Carey**