

Jarchow's research studies the potential of prairies



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Less than 1 percent of South Dakota can be classified as traditional prairie land, meaning that a mixture of native species of plantlife – grasses, wildflowers, legumes – is growing on it.

An assistant professor of Sustainability at the University of South Dakota currently is researching how prairies may be reincorporated onto the state's landscape in a way that is both environmentally friendly, and profitable for landowners.

"Prairies are certainly the historic land use for this area, and now there's almost none that are left, because most of them have been converted into agricultural uses. And so, what I'm interested in looking at, are there ways of getting prairie back on the landscape in general," said Dr. Meghann Jarchow.

One potential way to do this is bioenergy production through the use of prairie biomass.

"You would get all the environmental benefits that you get from prairies, like less erosion, increased diversity, restoring this ecosystem that's almost gone, and then farmers would also get some value-added economic component to it," Jarchow said.

Part of her research entails finding out how suitable prairies are for bioenergy production.

"Some of the research

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I've done is getting data on what would it look like if it was incentivized for farmers," she said. "There aren't really currently any bioenergy plants that could say, 'I'm ready for biomass to put into biofuel.'

"It would be more having the data so we would know how much biomass you could get, how well would it be converted, what do you get in terms of reducing soil erosion and things like that," she said.

Jarchow said that while this aspect has not yet been done, she is looking into working with landowners to get prairie ground on their property, and seeing whether they could get some value from that.

"We're thinking about, are there transitional things that we could do that people could get value for it now, are there future uses, things like carbon markets or bioenergy, and what would be some of the trade-offs in terms of profitability and things like that," she said.

One potential benefit is the adaptability of many prairie plants in

relation to the extreme seasons brought on by climate change.

"Prairie plants have evolved to be able to tolerate those conditions," Jarchow said. "They're not as finely-tuned as corn and soybean systems that really need rain at certain parts of the year but also need it to be dry so you can do field activities.

"Prairie systems could be more flexibly managed, which would be potentially important for climate change," she said.

The inherent diversity of prairie systems also makes them more adaptable.

"When you're talking about climate change and tending to have more extreme weather conditions ... having that diversity helps buffer against climate change because the plants have this built-in wiggle room," Jarchow said.

Jarchow came to USD in the fall of 2012, and teaches courses relating to the school's Sustainability major.

For more information, visit <http://www.agroecologist.org/>.

ESTATE AUCTION

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