

The Formation of the Minnesota Agro-Forestry Cooperative¹

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Over the past several years, a new technology has been emerging at the boundary of agriculture and forestry: short rotation hybrid poplars. As a cross between European poplars and native cottonwoods, there are several varieties which are in various stages of evaluation and expanding cultivation. These poplars have the unique characteristics of being able to grow to harvestable size in ten to twelve years, when cultivated as a row crop, as opposed to the forty to sixty years required by the native aspen of Minnesota.

There are reliable projections of shortfalls in the supply of native aspen for the wood fiber industry, based upon sustainable harvests, in an eight to twenty year time frame. This will create demands for alternative raw materials. It forms the basis of economic opportunity for cultivation of hybrid poplars as an alternative to traditional row crops, most particularly on marginal farmlands. However, the ability for individual farmers to capture the opportunity is inherently limited by the requirements of the user industries (primarily pulp and oriented fiberboard) for large quantities of material with

predictable quality.

The Minnesota Agro-Forestry Cooperative was formed to provide a vehicle for individual landowners to participate in a much larger opportunity. The initiative for the formation of the cooperative was provided by the WesMin RC&D Council in collaboration with Cooperative Development Services of Madison, Wisconsin; Onanegozie RC&D Council; and individual landowners. The development of the cooperative has proceeded through feasibility studies, and business plan development and incorporation. It is partially funded by a small group of individual members and through a grant of \$9,000 received from the Cooperative Development Initiative at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls.

As a start-up operation, the Minnesota Agro-Forestry Cooperative has the challenge to provide incremental value to its members over and above the value of hybrid poplars, while maintaining a focus and appreciation for the basic opportunity.

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