Survey of Biocrude-Producing Plants from the Southwest¹

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One hundred ninety-five species of plants native to the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico were surveyed for potential feedstocks for biocrude production in arid lands. Biocrude is the hydrocarbon and hydrocarbonlike chemical fraction of plants which may be extracted by organic solvents and upgraded to liquid fuels and chemical feedstocks. Plants were evaluated using a set of models which provide estimates of oil and energy production costs.

Plants producing either latex or resinous exudates had the highest percentage of high energy extracts. Total extracts were highest in smaller, potentially less productive plants. The optimum combination of percentage biocrude and potential yield occurred in plants of intermediate size having higher than average extractables. High biomass yields do not appear necessary for the economic production of biocrude in irrigated, arid regions. Several desert plants might produce biocrude for between \$10-15 per million BTU without by-product credits.

Green plants synthesize reduced constituents that can be directly extracted for use as petroleum-like feedstocks (Calvin, 1979; Buchanan et al., 1978; Haag et al., 1980). This extractable biocrude is a complex mixture of triglycerides, waxes, terpenes, phytosterols, and other modified isoprenoid compounds. Biocrude can be catalytically cracked to produce high yields of either liquid fuels or chemical feedstocks (Haag et al., 1980; Hinman et al., 1980).

Presently several species are being investigated as potential biocrude feedstocks. Latex-bearing plants, particularly *Asclepias* spp. and *Euphorbia* spp., have received the most attention. *Euphorbia lathyris* L. is the subject of a research program at the University of Arizona, and *Asclepias speciosa* Torr. is being evaluated by the Plant Resources Institute in Salt Lake City. These 2 genera have also been examined as potential feedstocks for rubber (Whiting, 1943) and wax (Hodge and Sineath, 1956).

Calvin (1979) and Bassham (1977) have suggested that "energy farms" be developed specifically for arid and semiarid lands, particularly in the southwestern United States. This area is potentially highly productive because of its high solar radiation (Bassham, 1977) and long growing season. The Southwest also has considerable acreage of uncultivated land that is unsuitable for conventional food and fiber crops, but which might be used for cultivation of energy crops (Lipinsky and Kresovich, 1979). Johnson and Hinman (1980) stressed that developing biocrude farming and extracting facilities on marginal lands are desirable because they would not compete with food and fiber crops.

We have conducted a survey of numerous desert plants from the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico to determine their economic potential as biocrude producers. This paper describes our procedures for evaluating these plants and summarizes the results obtained from the survey.

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Previous attempts to evaluate plants for potential biomass yields, growing costs, and percentage of extractables have used criteria based on rating points (Buchanan et al., 1978). We experimented with several such rating criteria with unsatisfactory results—the rating systems failed to discriminate adequately among species. In addition, a species' numerical rating provided no indication of the plant's economic potential. Our current procedures provide direct estimates of unit costs for production of biocrude and energy for every species evaluated.

METHODS

Plant collection

Each plant collected from the wild included a sample for solvent extraction and a voucher specimen, and field notes were kept which included habit, height, and pertinent environmental and phenological data. Voucher specimens were deposited in the University of Arizona Herbarium (AZ).

Samples for extraction were at least 20 g dry weight. Few species whose individuals typically weigh less than 20 g dry weight at maturity were included in the survey since such species have a limited potential for biomass production. A sample representative of the entire aboveground portion of the plant was collected from large individuals for which it was impractical to collect the whole plant. Since it was observed that the amounts of extractables vary within many species, those species which appeared to have good potential were collected several times throughout their ranges and at different phenological stages.

Laboratory analyses

The objectives of the laboratory analyses were to provide estimates of the amounts of extractable material, expressed as percentages of the plant dry weight, as well as the energy contents of those extracts.

The extraction procedure which was followed during this study has been described briefly by Hinman et al. (1980). Twenty g of oven-dried and ground (3 mm mesh) plant material were extracted with 300 ml of cyclohexane for 12 h followed by a second extraction with 300 ml of ethanol for 12 h using Soxhlet extractors. The extracts were dried to a constant weight in a fume hood, followed by drying under high vacuum for 24 h.

Energy values for the 2 extracts and the residue or bagasse were estimated from elemental analyses of each fraction from several species. The energy values were first estimated from the C:H:O ratios by comparison with compounds of similar composition. These estimates were confirmed by bomb calorimetry of extracted and unextracted samples of the same collections used for elemental analysis. The cyclohexane and ethanol extracts were characterized as high BTU (17.5 kBTU/lb) and medium BTU (10.0 kBTU/Ib) feedstocks, respectively (Hinman et al., 1980). By comparison, crude oils vary from 19-22 kBTU/lb. For the purpose of conducting the survey, it was assumed that the energy values of extracts were similar for all species. Biocrude was defined as the sum of the cyclohexane and ethanol extracts.

Selection criteria

Our selection criteria are a set of models or computing formulas (Table 1) for estimating unit costs of oil and energy production based on agricultural costs for Arizona.

The energy content of biocrude was calculated as a weighted average of the cyclohexane and ethanol extracts [formula (1)].

Ovendry biomass yields for each species were estimated as a function of the annual height growth $(H, in cm)$ by formula (2) . Since the majority of the species surveyed were annual or perennial herbs, H was generally the height of the plant. Formula (2) also can be used for woody plants because it is essentially a biomass predictor. When the current year's growth can be determined from morphological evidence, the annual yield can be estimated as the difference in biomass as calculated from the current and previous seasons' heights. Alternately, the biomass as calculated by formula (2) can be divided by an estimate of plant age to obtain an annual yield estimate. Formula (2) was derived from data on the size and mass of whole plants, and it applies to plants which are between 40-250 cm in height.

The yield of biocrude (bbl/acre) was calculated by formula (3) , and the energy yield by formula $(4)^3$. The energy yield given by formula (4) is for the biocrude fraction of the plant only. The energy content of the bagasse remaining after solvent extraction is approximately:

> $\overline{\text{MBT}}$ U/acre \approx .14 (tons/acre) [100 – (% total extracts)] GJ/ha \simeq .16 (tons/ha) $[100 - (\% \text{ total extracts})]$.

The latter values are useful for total system energy budget calculations, and for determining the potential for the bagasse to meet process energy requirements or to generate electricity for sale.

The crucial step in our procedure is the estimation of growing costs. Formula (5) was used to estimate growing costs for irrigated agriculture in central Arizona. This model, which estimates per acre costs in 1980 dollars, was derived from information provided by N. G. Wright, staff agricultural economist, Office of Arid Lands Studies, University of Arizona. The model assumes average fertilizer (30 lb $N + 8$ lb P per dry ton yield) and water (8 acre-in per ton dry yield) requirements. Alternative models have been developed for variable water requirements, since water use is the principal factor influencing growing costs in irrigated agriculture.

Biocrude and energy costs were estimated by formulas (6) and (7) , respectively, which include a cost of \$20 per ton for extraction of biocrude using continuous solvent extraction equipment currently available for use in the seed oil industries. The estimate for processing costs was based on information provided by N. Hunt

bbl/acre = tons/acre \times [(%CH + %EtOH)/100] \times (2,000 lb/ton) \times (1 bbl/285 lb) $= .07$ (tons/acre) (%CH + %EtOH)

³ These formulae are simple contractions of longer equations containing several constants, e.g., formula (3) :

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Moore and Associates and Crown Iron Works and applies to a single-step extraction at a 1,000 ton/day plant. The 2-step laboratory procedure, while providing working estimates of both the amount and energy content of extractables, would be prohibitively expensive as a commercial process. We are currently experimenting with various solvents and methods of feedstock preparation that would be appropriate for a single-step commercial extraction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We surveyed over 400 collections of plants from southwestern North America. Although the collections encompassed considerable taxonomic diversity (195 species and varieties in 107 genera in 35 families), plants producing either latex or resinous exudates were emphasized. Laboratory analyses of all species included in the survey are presented in the Appendix.

The yields of extractable materials in different groups of plants are summarized in Table 2 and Fig. 1. Plants producing neither latex nor resinous exudates produced an average 2.5% cyclohexane extract and 14.9% ethanol extract (percentage by weight of ovendry, aboveground biomass). Cyclohexane extracts were higher in the latex-bearing plants. Average yields of *Euphorbia* spp. and *Asclepias* spp. were similar. *Amsonia* spp. produced consistently high ethanol extracts.

The highest cyclohexane extracts were found in resinous species. Such plants occur in several families, but most of the resinous plants in our sample were members of the Compositae, tribe Astereae (e.g., *Baccharis, Chrysothamnus, Grindelia, Gutierrezia, Haplopappus, Xanthocephalum).* The resinous substances coat stems, leaves, and involucres of these plants.

The legumes in our sample showed low cyclohexane and total extracts. Legumes have received considerable attention as potential bioenergy feedstocks because of their ability to fix nitrogen which would result in lower fertilizer costs. However, desert legumes do not appear to be good candidates as feedstocks for biocrude production.

The cyclohexane extract is the high-energy component of plants that has proved amenable to upgrading to liquid fuels and chemical feedstocks. The distributions of percentage yields of cyclohexane extracts in our collections of latex

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF PERCENTAGE EXTRACTABLES IN 195 SPECIES OF SOUTHWESTERN PLANTS.

^a Means not followed by same letter are significantly different $(P < .05)$.

Fig. 1. Frequency distributions of percentage cyclohexane extracts for resinous, latex, and other plants.

species, resinous species, and other plants are shown in Fig. 1. Most collections of nonresinous, nonlatex plants varied between 0-4% cyclohexane extracts, and none exceeded 8%. Most latex plants analyzed contained between 4-8% cyclohexane extracts. Although resinous species showed the greatest variation in cyclohexane extracts, these plants predominate among species with cyclohexane extracts exceeding 10%.

Fig. 2 illustrates a major finding of the survey—maximum observed total extractables appeared to be inversely proportional to plant size. Thus, species with the best potential for annual biomass production contained the least amount of high-energy extractable material. Some possible explanations for this observation include: production of hydrocarbon and hydrocarbon-like compounds requires an

Fig. 2-3. Fig. 2. *(Top)* Percentage extractables (cyclohexane followed by ethanol) and plant height in 300 collections of plants from southwestern North America. Fig, 3. *(Bottom)* Application of the Arizona selection criteria, showing relationship of biocrude content (percent of aboveground dry weight) and estimated biomass yields to biocrude cost. Each point in Fig. 2-3 represents a single plant collection.

energy expenditure by the plant, thus reducing growth; large plants are required to partition a larger fraction of their photosynthate into polymeric carbohydrate structural materials in order to support the increased mass; and hydrocarbon production could be a response to stress, which would be correlated with reduced growth.

This trade-off between plant size and percentage extractables is largely responsible for the difficulty of devising useful selection criteria based on rating points. A high rating for potential yield tends to be offset by a low rating for percentage extractables, and vice versa. Our current criteria were designed to evaluate this trade-off, as shown in Fig. 3, where percentage biocrude is plotted against potential biomass yield. The dashed lines are isograms for predicted biocrude costs. These isograms were calculated by setting the price of biocrude constant and combining and rearranging formulae (3) and (6) :

> (% total extractables) = $\frac{100 + 75 \text{ (tons/acre)}}{25 \text{ (0.11)}}$.07 (\$/bbl) (tons/acre)

Few plant collections fall above the \$50/bbl isogram, and they are all plants with low to moderate predicted biomass yields.

High yields are generally considered mandatory for economical production of energy from plants (Hinman et al., 1980; Johnson and Hinman, 1980). However, our results show that all plants with yields exceeding 9 tons acre^{-1} yr^{-1} would produce higher cost biocrude than several plants with projected yields of 2-6 tons acre^{-1} yr^{-1}. Although feedstock costs (\$/ton) would decline with increasing yields, extraction costs (\$/bbl) would increase because of the lower fraction of biocrude in higher yielding plants.

All species identified by our selection criteria as having the potential to produce biocrude for \$15.00 or less per million BTU are listed in Table 3. The cost figures

	Morphology ^a			Extractables			Yields		Costs	
Species	Habit	Type	Coll. No. ^b	%CH	%EtOH	kBTU/ lb	Ton/ acre	Bbl/ acre		$$/bb $ $$/MPTU$
<i>Pedilanthus macrocarpus Benth.</i>	Shrub	L	2477	25.0	11.1	15.2	4.1	10.3	40	9.00
Asclepias albicans Wats.	Shrub	L	1963	14.0	20.4	13.1	5.1	12.3	39	10.30
A. subulata Decne.	Shrub	L	1986	9.3	22.2	12.2	4.3	9.5	44	12.60
Chrysothamnus paniculatus (Gray)										
Hall	Shrub	R	2427	18.3	14.3	14.2	2.2	5.1	52	12.60
C. nauseosus spp. bigelovii (Gray)										
Hall	Shrub	R	2408	15.1	20.8	13.2	2.0	5.0	50	13.10
Amsonia grandiflora Alexander	Per.	L	2228	5.1	33.2	11.0	2.4	6.6	42	13.30
Xanthocephalum gymno-										
<i>spermoides</i> (Gray) B. & H.	Ann.	R	2345	12.1	14.8	13.4	4.1	7.7	53	13.60
Amsonia hirtella var. pogono-										
<i>sepala</i> (Woodson) Wiggins	Per.	L	2354	8.6	29.8	11.7	2.0	5.4	46	13.60
A. kearneyana Woodson	Per.	L	2178	5.2	30.6	11.1	2.4	6.1	46	14.30
Asclepias erosa Torr.	Per.	L	2499	13.0	10.8	14.1	4.6	7.6	59	14.30
Grindelia camporum Greene	Bien.	R	2390	13.0	11.8	13.9	3.8	6.6	58	14.50

TABLE 3. PLANT SPECIES IDENTIFIED BY THE ARIZONA SELECTION CRITERIA WITH THE POTENTIAL TO PRODUCE BIOCRUDE FOR \$15 PER MILLION BTU OR LESS.

Ann. = annual; Per. = herbaceous perennial; Bien. = biennial; L = latex-bearing; R = resinous.

^b All collection numbers are those of S. P. McLaughlin; voucher specimens are deposited at AZ.

in Table 3 should be viewed as indicative only. A thorough economic analysis would require more precise data on each species' yield, biocrude production, water requirement, and fertilizer requirement under cultivation. The estimates in Table 3 fulfill the objective of identifying the best species for further agronomic and chemical research and development.

All species listed in Table 3 are either latex-bearing or resinous plants. It is important to note that in no case do the projected yields exceed those commonly reported for irrigated crops in the Southwest. Bioenergy projects dependent on extremely high yields with consequent high water use have little chance of succeeding in the arid Southwest. Biocrude yields vary from $5-12$ bbl acre^{-1} yr^{-1} among the plants listed in Table 3.

Factors other than the projected costs of energy production limit the potential of some of the species listed in Table 3. *Pedilanthus macrocarpus* Benth., a native of Baja California, Mexico, is probably too frost sensitive to be cultivated in most of the agricultural areas of the southwestern United States. Biocrude quality (kBTU/lb) in *Amsonia* spp. may be too low for upgrading to liquid fuels, although these species might be good feedstocks for fermentation. From our results it seems that the best candidates are probably *Asclepias* spp. and various resinous plants.

The cost figures in Table 3 indicate that biocrude might be produced in the arid Southwestern States for between \$10-15 per million BTU. Imported crude oil at \$42 per barrel costs approximately \$7.80 per million BTU. An economical use of the bagasse after solvent extraction would be required before biocrude could compete as a substitute for imported crude oil. Several options exist, including direct combustion to produce steam and electricity, the manufacture of animal feeds or soil amendments, or further conversion to other energy products.

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APPENDIX

Laboratory analyses of Southwestern plant species. Collection numbers are those of S. P. McLaughlin except where otherwise noted. All voucher specimens are deposited at AZ. Ann. = annual; Bien. = biennial; Per. = perennial herb; Suff. = suffrutescent; L = latex-bearing; R = resinous; NLR = neither latex nor resinous. Many species were collected several times, but only the collections with the highest and lowest percentage extractables are included.

APPENDIX -- Continued

$APPENDIX - Continue$

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APPENDIX -- Continued

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 \triangle Cultivated plant $\overline{\triangle}$ T.R. Peoples, not sequenced