

Genetics of Climate Adaptation Using Genome-Wide Association in Switchgrass

Alice MacQueen^{1*} (alice.macqueen@utexas.edu), Jason Bonette¹, John Lovell², Sujan Mamidi², Jeremy Schmutz², **Thomas Juenger¹**

¹The University of Texas at Austin; ²HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology, Huntsville, Alabama

Project Goals:

- **Establish common gardens of clonally replicated switchgrass genotypes to study ecotype divergence, local adaptation, and the spatial scale of genome-by-environment interaction across broad environmental gradients (e.g., precipitation, temperature, and soils).**
- **Identify genomic regions underlying adaptation and sustainability in switchgrass using genomewide associations.**
- **Investigate key switchgrass traits (resource use efficiency, drought tolerance, growing season phenology, freezing tolerance, tissue characteristics, and root system attributes) in climate adaptation and sustainability of switchgrass feedstock production.**

As sessile organisms, plants cannot move to escape unpredictable and changing environments. Which environments impact plants the most? How do plant genetic responses to the environment vary, and how do these responses evolve? One common hypothesis is that adaptation to specific environments, or local adaptation, occurs via tradeoffs involved in specialization: alleles with antagonistic pleiotropy increase fitness in specific environments, but have negative, pleiotropic effects in alternate environments. A contrasting hypothesis at the level of the allele is conditional neutrality, where alleles can increase fitness in specific environments without costs in alternative environments. As climates shift and climate variability increases, access to conditionally neutral alleles that improve fitness in specific stressful environments will be essential for improving crop species. Genomics-enabled research is now providing the statistical power to discover and characterize allelic variation in genes involved in adaptation.

Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) is an outcrossing, polyploid C4 perennial grass that has been championed as a promising biofuel feedstock. It is a common member of most native North American prairie communities and exhibits extensive phenotypic variability and adaptation across its range, particularly in response to latitude and precipitation gradients. Here, I report on the development of genome-wide association resources for a diversity panel of switchgrass. This diversity panel includes over 700 sequenced genotypes sampled from the majority of the range of switchgrass across the eastern United States. Clones of the sequenced individuals were planted at ten field sites covering 17° of latitude (1800 km) in the central United States. Phenotyping at these common garden sites allowed us to evaluate the contributions of individual loci to traits and fitness over a wide range of climatic conditions. In this poster, I present genetic analyses of climate adaptation in switchgrass using climate variables from each genotype's location of origin, and genetic analyses of phenology data from the 2019 growing season. In particular, I present preliminary results from genome-wide association studies aimed at detecting genes associated with specific climate adaptations of switchgrass across the species' latitudinal range.

References

1. <https://github.com/Alice-MacQueen/switchgrassGWAS>

This research was supported by the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Science, Office of Biological and Environmental Research award number DE-SC0014156 to TEJ.