

Energy coalition touts cellulose

By Jane Roberts

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By 2025, one of the largest pro-renewable energy groups in the nation says it is fully possible 25 percent of America's energy will come from crop production and residue.

Wednesday, the coalition that calls itself 25x'25 outlined the how-to's in Washington and in media events nationwide.

The message in Memphis was that the Southeast, with millions of acres of timber, has potential to lead the nation in cellulosic energy production -- the energy made directly from plant cell walls -- instead of the sugars and starches that are the raw ingredients in corn-based ethanol.

"There's a lot of potential in the Southeast if we do it right," said Brent Bailey, 25x'25 coordinator for the 11 Southeastern states.

Expect to see fields of fast-growing poplars, willows and switchgrass growing in what are now underused pastures or marginal croplands across the region.

"We're going to see this fuel come from the traditional things, but there will be whole new crops evolving," said Peter Nelson, spokesman for BioDimensions, a consulting firm for people interested in investing in renewable energy.

Today, all renewable energy sources, including wind and alternative fuels, supply 7 percent of the nation's energy needs.

Pumping it up to 25 percent will require new crops that at best could be harvested several times a year, plus the efficient use of the stalks and debris now plowed into the soil.

That waste is critical in the calculation because it would not require food crops being sacrificed for fuel, said Bruce Scherr, chief executive of Memphis-based Informa Economics Inc.

"That's where most of the interest is," he said.

Crop waste is also a major source of cellulosic ethanol, which has become the Holy Grail in the rush for renewable energy sources because it requires less energy to produce than more commonly discussed corn-based ethanols and soy-based biodiesels.

The problem with waste -- corn stalks or wood waste -- is it is generally more difficult to collect and assemble at production facilities.

Although the temperate Southeast may be particularly suited to lead the nation in cellulose, experts say the infrastructure to process it into fuel will not be competitive until at least 2012.

That is not slowing investors. To understand how fast the pursuit is, consider that venture capitalists in North America -- including some of the biggest investors in the world -- poured \$740 million into biofuel companies last year, a sevenfold increase over 2005.

"Is there urgency? Yes, there's urgency, and the high priority is to fund research," said Sumesh Arora with the Mississippi Technology Alliance. "If gas were \$1.50 a gallon, we wouldn't be having this discussion."

The goal is to form a broad consortium of support in each state to move the ag-based agenda forward.

So far, its supporters include 400 agriculture, labor and manufacturing groups, including the big three U.S. automakers and such disparate partners as the American Farm Bureau Federation and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"We find all kinds of people who have nothing in common can agree on the need for renewable energy and how to move forward," Bailey said.

The group is funded by the nonprofit Energy Future Coalition, which formed in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, to study the root causes of terrorism and the role U.S. energy needs play in the equation.

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