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Biofuel company eyes Williamsburg County

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By Kristen George



KINGSTREE — Williamsburg County is the proposed home of a new biofuel company that plans to breathe new life into the county's economy by revitalizing its agriculture industry through the manufacturing of alternative energy sources.

Executives from Carolina-Pacific LLC will meet with Williamsburg County Council on May 15 to present their strategic plan that includes building eight biodiesel plants and an ethanol plant within the county.

The project's initial investment will be close to \$250 million and when completed would generate a total of 58 million gallons of biodiesel and 100 million gallons of ethanol annually said Frank Evans, vice president of Carolina-Pacific.

The company is waiting for approval from Williamsburg County Council before it moves forward in securing funding sources, he said.

Evans estimates that the project will initially create about 250 construction jobs within the county. Once the facility is operational, the company will generate 160 direct jobs and another 1,500 indirect jobs through its supply and distribution activities in the area, he said.

"This project could potentially provide a tremendous opportunity for the citizens of Williamsburg County," said F. Hilton McGill Jr., executive director for the Williamsburg County Development Corp. "However, it is very premature to discuss the details of this project until county council has a chance to take a good look at it."

Evans, who is a native of Kingtree, said in addition to making improvements to his hometown, he would like to see the company locate in Williamsburg County because of the many benefits the county offers to new industry.

"We're keeping our options flexible for several locations within the state, but we focused on Williamsburg primarily because it has infrastructure in place—railroad, water, access to five different Interstates—and also because the agricultural opportunities are huge," Evans said. "Ever since the tobacco industry has decreased, farmers have been seeking a new dependable crop."

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, biofuels such as ethanol and biodiesel, made from plant matter instead of petroleum, can be blended with or directly substitute for gasoline and diesel. Adding biofuel to petroleum products reduces air pollution by allowing the fuel to combust more efficiently.

Carolina-Pacific would produce switchgrass as its plant matter, or feedstock. Switchgrass is a high-yield North American grass similar to hay that offers low-cost production due to low nutrient use, minimal pesticide requirements, propagation by seed and perennial growth habit, the DOE said.

A DOE study called the net energy gain for ethanol production from switchgrass "exceptionally favorable, coupled with low greenhouse gas emissions."

The demand for biofuel products is steadily increasing. The U.S. produced 3.9 billion gallons of ethanol in 2005. As of January 2007, the U.S. ethanol production capacity was at 5.4 billion gallons, with an additional 6.2 billion gallons capacity under construction, the DOE reported.

The company's long-term plan would be to build a blending facility that would blend the ethanol it produces with gasoline from other companies, Evans said.

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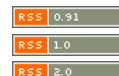
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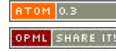

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