

The next alternative - biodiesel

Sunday, July 9, 2006

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THE REGISTER-MAIL

GALESBURG - With the ethanol craze growing by the minute, local business officials are hoping to become part of what could be the next wave in renewable fuel production.

Biodiesel - a clean burning fuel alternative produced from soybeans or animal fat - is rapidly gaining ground as a cost-effective alternative to fossil fuels.

"There are a lot of reasons this area should have a plant," said Dick Johnson, manager of the Western Illinois Entrepreneurship Center in Galesburg.

Many of those reasons will be outlined in a July 20 interactive forum on biodiesel at the Knox County Farm Bureau, 180 S. Soangetaha Road. The forum runs from 8 a.m. to noon and is open to the public free of charge. The event is sponsored by the Galesburg Regional Economic Development Association, Knox County Board and Illinois Soybean Association.

The featured speakers at the forum are State Rep. Don Moffitt, R-Gilson; David Pritchard of Pritchard Osborne; William Raney from the Renewable Energy Group; Eric Pitcher with BNSF Railway Co.; and Erin Orwig of the Illinois Value Added Rural Development Center. Johnson said each speaker will bring a piece of the biodiesel puzzle to their presentations. Following the presentations, GREDA President Greg Mangieri will moderate a panel discussion with the five speakers.

"We wanted to see if we could get a group of people who are credible and know the make up of the biodiesel process," said Johnson, "and that's what we have done."

Moffitt is the opening speaker at the forum. Johnson said the longtime legislator has been promoting the positives of a biodiesel plant in this area long before the Knox County Board and GREDA started examining the process.

Pritchard is a managing partner with Pritchard Osborne LLC, a business advisory firm with offices in Litchfield and St. Louis. Pritchard will discuss the financial and accounting issues involved with building a biodiesel plant.

Raney is a sales and production manager for Renewable Energy Group - a design-and-build biodiesel plant firm based in Ralston, Iowa. Renewable Energy Group has constructed plants in Ralston, Wall Lake, Newton and Washington, Iowa; and Albert Lea, Minn.

Some of Renewable's plants are equipped to use both animal fat and soybeans to produce biodiesel, and one plant buys steam from an adjacent ethanol plant.

Pitcher is BNSF's regional manager for economic development in the company's Chicago office. He will address the railroad's perspective on alternative energy fuel transportation and usage.

Orwig is a technical assistant for the Western Illinois University-based rural development center.

Orwig manages the department's Biodiesel Evaluator software, which provides an interactive experience that assesses the feasibility of locating a plant in an area.

"I think we've got a pretty good program lined up," said Johnson. "Our area agri-business officials should be better informed after this meeting."

The idea of a biodiesel plant in Knox County isn't a completely new concept. The Knox County Board investigated the possibility of entering into the biodiesel business, but learned in May 2005 that the county cannot buy land for economic development purposes.

According to the Illinois Soybean Association's Web site, biodiesel can be used for both commercial and recreational purposes and its popularity is growing at a "staggering pace."

Johnson said the primary users of biodiesel are over-the-road truck drivers, farmers and companies using heavy machinery. Biodiesel performs on par with standard diesel fuel and no equipment modifications are necessary.

"It is primarily a vehicle for reducing our dependence on foreign oil," said Johnson.

There are several key reasons, said Johnson, why the area is suited to be home to a biodiesel plant:

- The presence of BNSF in Galesburg. The local classification yard is BNSF's second largest and also has a diesel repair shop.

"If BNSF goes to biodiesel in its engines, this would be the ideal location for a plant," said Johnson. "It would be all the more reason for them to fill their tanks here."

- The vast amount of soybean production in the area.

- The Farmland Foods plant in Monmouth, which is owned by Smithfield, would be a valuable resource of animal fat that could be used to produce biodiesel.

"The end game is trying to develop interest in building a biodiesel plant and getting something organized," said Johnson.