

Biodiesel In Pa.?

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In the U.S., some biodiesel is already being produced from soybean and other vegetable oils and used by farmers and a number of public agencies. Most of this biodiesel comes from the West and Midwest and is usually blended with #2 diesel at a rate of 2 or 20 percent (B2 and B20, respectively).

While some farmers and small entrepreneurs make biodiesel on their own, there are only about 10 commercial-scale plants in the country, according to Mike Gerhart, an economic consultant with the Regional Economic Development District Initiative (REDDI) based in Harrisburg.

"There's a little biodiesel coming into Pennsylvania — not a lot," Gerhart said.

REDDI is in the early planning stages of bringing a biodiesel-producing plant to the area. On Wednesday, planners hosted the first of a series of meetings to describe the process and hear the input of farmers and other interested parties. Another meeting is set Monday, April 21, at the USDA Service Center in Gettysburg.

Russ Montgomery, REDDI president, said the group is looking for farmers to join the steering committee guiding the project.

"We can't do any of this without farmers," Montgomery said. "We want the farmers to be at the table."

Mike Shearer of Hershey Equipment is one of the leaders in the new initiative to help create better markets for area farmers by making renewable, environmentally friendly biodiesel out of soybeans.

In the good crop year of 2001, Pennsylvania produced 17 million bushels of soybeans on 400,000 acres — an average of 43 bushels per acre, Shearer said. In last year's drought, the number dropped to a total of 11 million bushels at 28 bushels to the acre.

About 9.5 million bushels of soybeans per year would be required to supply a biodiesel facility producing 10 million gallons a year — the plant size REDDI is considering, at least initially.

According to Montgomery, the biodiesel project would be "starting small at 10 million gallons."

Shearer said soybean markets for area farmers were hurt considerably by the collapse in June 2001 of an Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) pier on the Port of Baltimore, where much of the local soybean crop was taken for export. After negotiations failed with the Maryland Port Authority for restoration of the pier, ADM discontinued operation of the grain elevator on the site, effective March 1.

That means most soybeans leaving the area now go to the south and to poultry operations on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

"It's not cheap to move the beans down there," Shearer said.



Russ Montgomery, left, and Mike Gerhart are part of an economic development team that is initiating a biodiesel project in southcentral Pennsylvania.

REDDI plans to initiate a feasibility study on the economic potential of two types of biodiesel plants in the area.

One possible type of plant would include an oilseed crushing facility to extract the oil from soybeans, producing feed-quality soybean meal as a by-product. Construction costs for such a plant would be about \$25-30 million.

A second possibility, costing about \$10 million to build, would be a plant in which all the soybean oil is purchased, and no oil extraction is done on the site.

While the plant with a crushing facility is nearly three times

as expensive to build, it would be likelier to use local soybeans, according to Gerhart. Additionally, the soybean meal produced as a by-product could be used to feed the region's livestock.

According to Shearer, 420,500 tons of soybean meal are consumed annually in Pennsylvania. Soy hulls are another valuable by-product.

The feasibility study would evaluate supply and demand for feedstocks and products, provide analysis of key governance and management issues, and make specific recommendations for a biodiesel plant in Pennsylvania.

REDDI hopes to have a consulting firm hired to perform the study in time to have the results by early next year.

Many plants in western states use hexane, a solvent made from petroleum, to extract the oil from soybeans, a process that is "efficient but not environmentally friendly," Shearer said. He noted that the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection would probably not allow the process in the state, but would approve of a crushing facility.

Soybeans are made up of 12 percent oil and 78 percent meal, along with hulls, moisture, and other components. Pure soybean oil contains other compounds, including glycerol that is used in the pharmaceutical industry.

Converting the oil to an



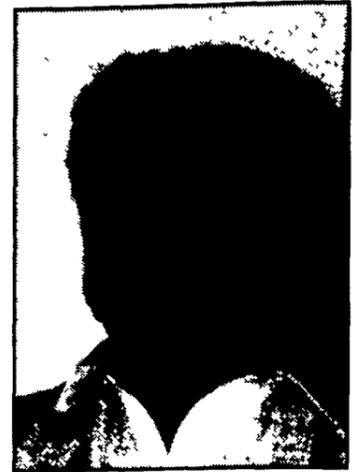
Brian Peifer, a diesel mechanic from the Oley area, makes biodiesel from kitchen waste oil salvaged from local restaurants.

approved biodiesel requires a methane separation process that removes the glycerol and gums from the oil.

While many types of vegetable oils, including peanut and canola, can be converted to biodiesel, soybean oil is the most cost-effective, according to Shearer.

Brian Peifer, a mechanic from the Oley area, was in attendance at the meeting Wednesday at the Berks County Ag Center. He said he and his son have been producing biodiesel from waste kitchen oil obtained from local restaurants. He said he has tried the product in diesel engines, with good results.

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Mike Shearer explains the process of converting soybean oil into biodiesel.

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