

Florida gears up for ethanol

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Tuesday, January 08, 2008

PALM BEACH GARDENS — Florida could begin producing fuel ethanol for commercial use within 18 months, the state's agriculture chief said Monday.

And one day, much of that fuel will come from sources other than corn, said Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson.

"Corn is not going to be our crop," Bronson said. "It is going to be another series of crops. Cellulosic technology gives us the ability to do that."

Bronson spoke Monday after meeting with 20 or so steering committee members of 25 x '25, a national group whose goal is for agriculture to provide 25 percent of the nation's energy by the year 2025. The group plans today to tour two South Florida agribusinesses that could someday help provide ethanol.

Southern Gardens Citrus in Clewiston and Florida Crystals Corp.'s Okeelanta plant south of South Bay, where ethanol plants are planned within the next few years, are on the group's itinerary, Bronson said.

The two sites are among five ethanol plants on the drawing board in Florida. The 25 x '25 group met Monday at the DoubleTree Hotel in Palm Beach Gardens, where Bronson and U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, reiterated their commitment to alternative energy and the nation's agricultural industry.

Producing renewable fuels and reducing the nation's dependence on foreign oil will improve national security, secure the food supply, strengthen agriculture and bring an economic revival to Central Florida, Mahoney said.

"We are the biggest biomass-producing state in the nation," Mahoney said. "It's been Commissioner Bronson fighting for Florida by himself. He has

now got an ally in myself in Washington to make sure Florida capitalizes on this great opportunity."

Florida's citrus crop's byproducts, such as pulp and peel, have the potential to provide as much as 60 million gallons of ethanol a year, Mahoney said. "It's a nice thing. It's not a drop in the bucket compared to where we need to go," Mahoney said.

Bronson said he thinks that agriculture in Florida can provide as much as 30 percent of energy needs, drawing on resources such as sorghum and grasses. "The amount of fuel extracted will be tremendous," he said. "We do not want to reduce the food supply of the state of Florida. We can produce the same food supply and grow second and third crops for fuel production."

Talks for a proposed 4 million-gallon ethanol plant at Southern Gardens Citrus are under way. Talks are ongoing among the citrus firm, FPL Energy LLC and Citrus Energy LLC of Boca Raton.

J. Read Smith, a St. John, Wash., wheat and cattle producer who co-chairs the 25 x '25 steering committee, said farmers will still need to use fossil fuels for the foreseeable future.

"We need everything we have now," Smith said. "We need to do everything we can to make certain those alternatives to fossil fuels are ready to go as soon as possible."

Mahoney said the federal energy bill, signed into law last month, and the upcoming farm bill will send "a clear signal" to Wall Street that the national government supports the production of alternative fuels.

Florida, because of its large supply of citrus peels and other biomass, stands to reap large benefits. Using corn as the source of ethanol will "max out" by 2016 or 2017, Mahoney said.

"Cellulosic ethanol is critical," he said. "We see the end of the corn train already."