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Can Waste Become Fuel?

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TAMPA - The city of Tampa wants to turn its yard waste and recycled newspapers into ethanol.

Earlier this year, it solicited information from companies across the country that specialize in producing ethanol from waste products, and seven responded, said Tonja Brickhouse, head of the city's solid waste department. City officials plan to meet with company representatives before the end of the year.

"My folks have really been excited," Brickhouse said.

This is different from growing food, such as corn, to make the ethanol, she said. "We have existing waste, and we have to do something with it. Why not turn it into fuel."

She said she knows of only one other local government in Florida, Indian River County, that is exploring making ethanol from solid waste. And no plants, public or private, have broken ground in the state. But the University of Florida is working with South Florida sugar producer Florida Crystals to open an ethanol production research facility next year, using the material left over after sugar cane is processed, called bagasse.

Several companies across the country are developing processes to make ethanol from a variety of waste and non-food materials, such as citrus peels, sweet sorghum and pine trees.

"There are several technologies that work, proven at the pilot and demonstration scale. The potential is huge, particularly in Florida, where you have so much of this material," said Matt Hardwig of the Renewable Fuels Association.

Tampa collects about 15,000 tons of yard waste each year and expects that to increase to 21,000 tons over the next three years as it begins to collect in more areas. It also collects about 4,500 tons of newspapers.

It would need more material to get an ethanol plant started, Brickhouse said. So it's looking at combining yard waste from several municipalities.

Where the plant is located will depend on the company the city ends up working with. That company will own and operate the plant.

"There are opportunities," Brickhouse said. "The dream is to be able to take waste we handle and generate some fuel, and it would be nice if I could put that fuel in my city trucks."

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