

State ethanol industry ready to go without corn, experts say

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WEST PALM BEACH — Ethanol production in Florida is nonexistent now, but its day is coming soon, two experts told business leaders Monday.

And the state's supply of the alternative fuel won't be corn but biomass, meaning inedible waste materials such as agricultural residues, tree trimmings and yard clippings.

"It does minimize the food-versus-fuel debate," said Gustavo Cepero, vice president of West Palm Beach-based Florida Crystals Corp.

Cepero and George Philippidis, associate director of the Applied Research Center at Florida International University, spoke to a luncheon hosted by the Business Development Board of Palm Beach County at the Airport Hilton.

The two touted the benefits of ethanol and biodiesel: They are renewable and domestically produced, which improves national security by cutting the nation's dependence on foreign oil.

"The value biofuels bring to agriculture will be tremendous," Philippidis said.

A \$20 million University of Florida research-and-demonstration ethanol plant is still in the design stage and will probably be built in 2009, Cepero said. Florida Crystals is providing land and utilities for the UF plant, which will be built next to the sugar giant's Okeelanta mill and refinery south of South Bay.

Kevin Johns, director of the Palm Beach County Economic Development Council, said that one county goal is to be among the top five sustainable communities in the world.

"We want to grow the alternative energy cluster. I see this as anchoring our sustainability," Johns said of the UF plant.

The maximum amount of corn-based ethanol the nation can produce, because of land availability and other constraints, is 15 billion gallons. With the federal government's target of 36 billion gallons of ethanol production by 2022, that fuel will have to come from other stocks, Cepero and Philippidis said.

Ethanol made from corn produces about 400 gallons of fuel per acre, but switch grass could produce more than 1,000 gallons per acre, Philippidis said.

The current year has seen a "much larger emphasis toward ethanol in Florida," Cepero said.

Ethanol supplies from other states are showing up at major Florida gasoline retailers in the form of E10, a blend of 10 percent ethanol and 90 percent gasoline.

Major Florida ports are installing fuel-processing infrastructure such as blending and storage facilities, Philippidis said, and by the end of this year will be able to handle 1 billion gallons of ethanol a year.

Brad Krohn, president of U.S. EnviroFuels LLC near Tampa, said Monday his company plans to develop blending and storage facilities at the Port of Tampa and construct a cellulosic ethanol plant in Highlands County.