

UF, Florida Crystals near deal on ethanol project

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The University of Florida has tentatively selected *Florida Crystals Corp.* as a partner to develop a \$20 million ethanol plant in western Palm Beach County, pending approval of a senior university administrator.

If approved, UF and Florida Crystals will negotiate to build a research and demonstration plant at the company's Okeelanta facility, where bagasse, the fibrous pulp left after processing sugar cane, and other plant materials will be turned into 1 million to 2 million gallons of ethanol a year. The project is being funded by a state grant approved by the Legislature earlier this year to encourage the development of alternative fuels. The idea is to create fuel from renewable sources as alternatives to oil and gas.

A selection committee voted Tuesday to recommend Florida Crystals as the location for the project.

Mary Duryea, associate dean for research at UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, expects Jimmy Cheek, UF's senior vice president of agriculture and natural resources, to make the final decision within a week. *Buckeye Florida* of Perry was chosen as an alternate, if negotiations with Florida Crystals are not successful, she said.

Duryea said the plant will test biomass feedstocks, which are plant fiber and wood pulp, and include bagasse, sweet sorghum, sweet potatoes and grasses. The plant would generate cellulosic ethanol, meaning it is made from plants and agricultural waste.

"We're looking at producing ethanol in a very environmentally sound manner," she said.

Florida Crystals partnered with Florida International University earlier this year on a research project to treat the biomass material before it is turned into ethanol, said Gaston Cantens, Florida Crystals vice president of

corporate relations. Cantens said the company hopes that research can be used in concert with the UF plant.

"We've been looking at the possibility of going into ethanol production for some time now," Cantens said.

In July, *FPL Group Inc.* partnered with *Citrus Energy* of Boca Raton, to make ethanol from orange peels.

Brian Dean, executive director of the Interamerican Ethanol Commission, said the use of biomass waste needs to be applauded because ethanol can't be made solely with corn, which has other uses as food for people and livestock.

He said partnerships like the one between Florida Crystals and Florida represent "the future of ethanol."

"If we can make fuel out of things that usually end up in the compost pile, we are doing a great service to our environment, national security and energy security, and we are also prolonging the longevity of our oil and petroleum reserves," Dean said.

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