

## Reducing Our Dependency on Oil

The soaring price of gasoline has so many of us worried these days. But those of us here in Bibb County, a county so rich with forests and an economy based on forest products, should be encouraged that research at Auburn University into new forestry products-based biofuel technologies may someday reduce our dependency on oil while diversifying the local and state economy.

Experts are confident that a new generation of biofuel technologies under development at Auburn University no longer will require a tradeoff between U.S. energy self-sufficiency and the steep food prices currently associated with corn-based ethanol.

Currently, the rising cost of food and the growing inability to pay for it have left many consumers not only angry but also eager to pin the blame on ethanol --- namely the growing demand for corn as a ethanol feedstock as well as federal fuel mandates that promote ethanol use.

“One of the misconceptions is that the entire alternative energy program is solely dependent on corn as a feedstock and that you’ve got this natural competition between biofuel and food and feed,” says Larry Fillmer, director of Auburn University’s Natural Resources Management and Development Institute.

But as Fillmer and Steve Taylor, director of the NRMDI’s Center for Bioenergy and Bioproducts, have stressed time and again, the bioenergy picture includes more than just corn. “It’s not just about corn, and in the long run, our potential is to get way beyond corn,” says Taylor.

“We’re focusing on potential bioenergy sources beyond the food and feed products that are readily available throughout the state — sources that don’t necessarily take arable land used for feed crops out of production,” he says.

And because many of the stocks used to make this new generation of biofuels are readily available in Alabama, the implications for the state’s economy could be far reaching.

A prime example is forestry by-products, especially the residue — limbs, tops and small-diameter trees, for example — not used in most commercial timber operations. Auburn researchers hope to develop a cost-effective way to gasify this biomass material and convert it into fuel and other valuable products.

And when this and other approaches become commercially viable, Alabama and neighboring southern states will be poised to become some of the nation’s leading biofuel producers.

According to data from the Alabama Forestry Commission and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Alabama could take advantage of roughly 14.6 million tons of unused logging residue and small diameter trees each year. From those 14.6 million tons, Taylor believes it may be possible for Alabama to produce 2 billion gallons of ethanol or other liquid fuels.

To put it another way, Alabama one day may produce as much ethanol from woody biomass and similar types of biomass sources as Iowa currently produces from corn.

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