



Abilene area jumps into renewable energy opportunities

By Loretta Fulton

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An old joke says that when someone complained about the smell of a nearby oil field, the landowner replied, "It smells like money to me."

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples has a new take on the joke: Insert "cow manure" for oil, and that's what folks in Erath County are saying after the opening of a bio-gas facility that converts manure into pipeline quality gas.

Staples was the luncheon speaker Tuesday for the Texas Renewables '07 conference at the Abilene Civic Center.

Today's schedule includes more sessions on renewable energy, a luncheon speech by Texas Secretary of State Phil Wilson and free public viewing of exhibits.

The conference is sponsored by the Texas Renewable Energy Industries Association. As of noon Tuesday, 220 people had registered, with more expected today and Thursday, when tours of area wind farms will round out the conference.

Staples said rural Texas and agriculture can only benefit from the increasing development of renewable energy. But, he said, numerous challenges face the young industry, such as competition from traditional energy suppliers, complaints that renewable energy is too costly and that its production is too water-intensive.

Staples said meeting the challenges is worth the effort.

"I believe we must have a sound renewable energy program for our state and nation," he said.

Renewable energy is good for the economy, the environment and national security, Staples said, and those factors must be stressed to detractors.

Supporters of the development of renewable energy came away for this year's legislative session disappointed, Staples said, but they also learned something.

"It certainly lets us know there are things we need to get ready for the next Legislature," Staples said.

Among those are identifying a funding source, defining a time frame for making the renewable energy industry self-sufficient, determining the direction of the industry and speaking with a unified voice.

Staples pledged that the agriculture department will continue to be committed to renewable energy.

Abilene and surrounding communities are jumping into the future already. The Abilene area is home to numerous wind farms, Erath County has Microgy Inc.'s Huckabay Ridge biogas facility, and Hamlin is

working on opening a mesquite-fueled power plant.

Mesquite plant

John Robins, with Irving-based Mesquite Fuel & Agriculture Inc., said the Hamlin plant should be open by next spring or early summer.

When operational, the plant can produce electricity that will be added to the state's power grid and steam that can be transported by pipeline up to one mile for local industry.

Hamlin residents may not actually use electricity produced at the plant, but the local benefits will be numerous, Robins said.

His company is making a \$10 million capital investment in a new plant, and office that will employ 12 to 15 people with technical skills. Local taxing entities will benefit from a new revenue source.

Additional employees will be needed to harvest and transport mesquite to the plant. And landowners in Jones and neighboring counties can get their land cleared of mesquite free of charge.

The Hamlin plant will be the first of its kind, Robins said, and he said an additional five or six plants can be built in the West Central Texas area.

At the same time that mesquite is being harvested to fuel the plant, alternative crops such as sorghum and grasses will be grown on a 150-acre tract.

Robins said his company is working with Texas A&M University to grow the crops as another renewable source of fuel for the plant.

So far, the company has obtained a six and one-half acre site for the plant, 150 acres for the crop field, equipment and a permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Interest in Abilene

A renewable energy-related business could be on the horizon for Abilene, too, if interest shown Tuesday develops. A booth in the exhibit hall features a drawing of a proposed new speculative building that the Development Corporation of Abilene wants to build.

Bill Ehrie, president of the Abilene Industrial Foundation, said representatives of two solar energy companies and two wind energy companies stopped by for more information on the building.

The DCOA, which administers the city's one-half cent sales tax for economic development, will open bids on the building Dec. 4.

Later that month, the DCOA will vote on whether to accept any of the bids or decline them, Ehrie said. If a bid is accepted, a shell building would be constructed. A business that decides to locate in the building would determine how it is finished out.

If the building goes forward, the renewable energy companies that expressed interest, along with other interested businesses, would be notified, Ehrie said.

He expects more interest once the process nears an end.

"Interest continues to peak once you get closer to groundbreaking," he said.



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