dailycomet.com
Lafourche Parish, Louisiana

Construction starts on Raceland sugar cane conversion plant

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Published: Friday, March 6, 2015 at 4:08 p.m.
Last Modified: Friday, March 6, 2015 at 4:08 p.m.

The Stora Enso sugar cane waste conversion plant is under construction near Raceland Raw Sugar Corp.

Abby Tabor/Staff

Construction has started on a $60 million plant in Raceland that will convert sugar cane waste into chemicals, sweeteners and biofuels by 2017.

The project next to Raceland Raw Sugar Corp. along La. 182 is a demonstration to test the effectiveness of Finnish pulp and paper giant Stora Enso Biomaterials' technology for extracting chemical building blocks from bagasse.

When the project was announced in September, state officials said the plant would create about 80 permanent and 469 indirect jobs. But Stora Enso spokeswoman Kirsi Seppäläinen estimated it will create 40 jobs.

The state awarded the company a performance-based, $1 million grant to offset infrastructure costs.

If the techniques are proven economical, the technology could be expanded industrially.

Bagasse is the pungent leftovers after the marketable sugar has been ground from the cane. Though the years, there have been alternative uses for the refuse, but the practice for converting bagasse to chemicals and biofuels on an industrially economical scale has not been perfected, experts say.

Seppäläinen said minimal construction work and the contracting for equipment has begun.

"We're in the starting phase," she said.

When the bagasse comes out of the sugar mill, it is made up of 50 percent moisture, which allows it to be used to fuel raw sugar mills' boilers, said Herman Waguespack Jr., senior agronomist with the Thibodaux-based American Sugar Cane League.

Raceland Raw Sugar produces some 80,000 extra tons of bagasse each year, which will be the new plant's feedstock.

Industrial applications have come and gone, and each year, about 1 million tons of excess bagasse is produced by mills and has no value, said Jim Simon, American Sugar Cane League manager.

Some is dumped and buried, some incinerated and some used in more creative applications.

Simon said several uses of local bagasse have come and gone, including the manufacturing ceiling tiles and animal food. Valentine Paper used bagasse for years to produce paper.

Stora Enso acquired the technology and demonstration plan from California-based biotech company Virdia last summer.

"It's a combo of our acquisition of the technology and an investment in the plan to study the technology," Seppäläinen said.

There are several benefits if the technology is successful, Waguespack said.

"This could be a money-saving proposition. That's a definite benefit to our raw sugar mills," Waguespack said. "If this would catch on, this would help us with our leaf material deposited on the cane fields. Maybe it may be an answer to curtail the burning of the fields we have to do."

Waguespack said there is usually a large amount of bagasse around the raw sugar mills during this time of year after the sugar cane harvesting season.

"This is just another product coming from our sugar cane fields and it's a definite advantage," Waguespack said.

Scientists are still chasing the "big breakthrough" for the economical conversion of bagasse and similar plant materials into biofuel on industrial scales, *Benjamin Legendre, professor and director of the LSU AgCenter Audubon Sugar Institute*, said last year.

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