

## Cotton, canola show biodiesel promise

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MODESTO — The commercial development of biodiesel from select agricultural commodities grown in California may only be a few years away.

Last week Sustainable Conservation, a San Francisco-based environmental organization, celebrated the opening of a new office in Modesto by focusing attention on its plans to join the emerging biofuels industry.

"We're very excited about the prospects of biofuels in California," said Ladi Asgill, a project manager in Sustainable Conservation's Modesto office. While the Midwest is already ahead of the biofuels game, California is still trying to catch up, and in some cases catch on, Asgill said.

Similar programs that have worked for soybean and corn growers in the Midwest may also work in the Golden State.

"California can't produce the cheap oils like corn and soybean, but there are models that can work for us," Asgill said.

Both canola seed and cottonseed show promise as a biodiesel ingredient crop in California.

Asgill believes the 900,000 tons of cottonseed produced in California each year could help generate enough biodiesel to allow every cotton farmer to convert equipment over to a biodiesel and petroleum blended fuel.

The biggest challenge is developing enough capacity in the state to crush the seeds and refine the fuel. Sustainable Conservation, in cooperation with the cotton industry, has applied for government grants in hopes of completing a feasibility study to prove that the economics of crushing cottonseed would work.

"The goal for this project is to add value to cotton production," Asgill said. "Farmers will get more for the value of their cottonseed and cotton ginners will also add value by being able to market biodiesel."

The idea is already being tested on a smaller scale.

A pilot project with the organization and the Center for Irrigation Technology at the California State University in Fresno is allowing one farmer to press canola seed and cottonseed for use as a biodiesel ingredient.

"It looks like it will be viable if it's viewed in a holistic perspective," said James Tischer, a Center for Irrigation Technology regional programs manager. He explained that in order for the economics to work, canola would need to be produced economically and all of its byproducts used efficiently.

"We're hopeful because we could see 10 of the (small biodiesel) refineries going in between Bakersfield and Redding," he said.

In the Fresno area, growers are seriously looking at the potential of growing canola as a biodiesel



Jars of biofuel line up at attention, illustrating the promise that agricultural products can be used in fuels of the future.

fuel additive, said Joe Bezerra, executive director of the California Agricultural Technology Institute at CSU-Fresno. "We work with some of the most innovative farmers in the country," he said.

Biodiesel, which can be blended with petroleum-based diesel, can reduce emissions of carbon dioxide by up to 80 percent. Fuel blends that contain even 5 percent biodiesel can make a significant impact on reducing emissions, Asgill said.

Sustainable Conservation is a non-profit organization founded in 1992 to involve businesses in efforts to promote clean air, water and healthy ecosystems.

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