

WNC Gets Major Grant to Boost Biodiesel

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By Dale Neal

The beer you drink from an Asheville microbrewery one day could help you fill up your car's gas tank with a locally made, renewable fuel.

AdvantageWest officials and other partners announced Wednesday receiving a \$750,000 grant from the Biofuels Center of North Carolina to boost the feedstocks for the local biodiesel industry.

Local beermakers could join area farmers in new productions to feed more livestock, add to dietary supplements and natural products, and finally create more homegrown biodiesel. By 2015, that supply chain could result in 5.2 million gallons of locally made biofuels by 2017.

With an additional \$400,000 in contributions from 14 local agencies, businesses, colleges and universities, \$1.1 million will be spent across Western North Carolina in the next year in a boost to new farm crops, production, research and ultimately more jobs.

The grant money is part of the state's settlement with the Tennessee Valley Authority to clean up North Carolina air polluted by neighboring coal-fired plants. "We are very pleased that some of this money is coming back to Western North Carolina," said Tom Alexander, board chairman at AdvantageWest.

"Biofuels are place-based," said Stephen Burke, president and CEO of the Biofuels Center of North Carolina. "Through this sector, we can bring economic, agricultural and environmental benefit to Western North Carolina."

WNC can help contribute to the state's mandated goal of producing 10 percent of its transportation fuel supply from local crops by 2017, reducing dependence on petroleum from foreign countries.

At least one local company, Blue Ridge Biofuels, sees opportunities to recruit more farmers to grow canola as a winter crop, which can then be crushed and ultimately made into biodiesel.

Blue Ridge Biofuels is already partnering with Biltmore Estate in a pilot project, Field to Fryer to Fuel. Biltmore is growing around 60 acres of canola, which can be harvested and crushed into a cooking oil for the estate's restaurants. Blue Ridge Biofuels, which already collects used oil

from some 500 area restaurants, can recycle Biltmore's used oil into biodiesel, which in turn can fuel the estate's farm tractors and fleet.

Woodrow Eaton, Blue Ridge Biofuel's managing partner, wants to recruit more farmers to raise crops for his feedstock. The new AdvantageWest grant allows "the opportunity to improve our region's energy security and air quality while simultaneously building a new agriculture sector to help support our region's farmers."

Breweries could be a major source of a new feedstock for local producers. All the breweries setting up shop around Asheville could generate up to 200,000 pounds of spent brewer's grain each day.

That grain could be processed into a biomass that could produce biofuels. But before the used grain goes to a processing plant, new technologies could pull out substances that in turn could be used in the growing nutraceutical sector.

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Along with used glycerol from the biodiesel process, the grain substances can be used to make a safe coating for pills and dietary supplements, explained George Briggs, of the N.C. Arboretum and a board member of the Bent Creek Institute, a plant research center.

The process actually extends the shelf-life of the used grain, which in turn could feed up to 16,000 head of local livestock.

The grant will also provide for a new testing laboratory at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College to certify biodiesel samples made by local producers. Previously, Blue Ridge Biodiesel and other producers have had to send test samples to an Iowa lab.

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