



March 25, 2008

Area experts say United States needs to explore biofuels

Matthew Daneman
Staff writer

Growing your own gasoline — with mental images of lush green fields instead of Middle East oil fueling the nation's cars — has a nice ring to it.

But even two expert advocates of biofuels acknowledged Monday that the United States cannot farm its way to energy independence.

So why bother even pursuing biofuels such as ethanol and biodiesel?

"We need to try to relieve ourselves from foreign oil," Northern Biofuels President Jason Masters told an audience of about 100 environmentalists and curious listeners.

"This is a way to increase our competitiveness in the global arena ... by finding a way in America to create something in the land itself."

The event Monday night was a seminar on biofuels put together by the Federation of Monroe County Environmentalists and held at Brighton Town Hall.

For close to two hours, Masters and Jeff S. Gutterman, chairman of auto parts giant Delphi Corp.'s Next Generation Fuels Group, made the case for biofuels as a stop-gap measure that would at least lessen the nation's need for oil until something better comes along.

Gutterman, a director of the Rochester Academy of Science, is convinced that something is coming. Some day.

"In the long term, there will be some disruptive technology," he said, pointing to the possibility of hydrogen-powered fuel cells becoming economically viable if and when gasoline reaches about \$6 a gallon.

In the short term, however, biofuels still come with numerous questions and shortcomings, including debates in the science community about whether ethanol takes more energy to produce than it provides.

Biofuels are a small but expanding industry in the Rochester-area economy.

In Orleans County, Western New York Energy LLC's newly constructed plant is turning out ethanol that's being used, among other places, in the few area filling stations that sell E85 fuel.

And Masters said his Wayne County-based facility could begin production of biodiesel — diesel derived from vegetable oils — by mid-May.

Longer term, Masters said he and business partner Bob Bechtold, the president of Harbec Plastics in

Wayne County and a longtime alternative energy proponent, have a vision for a sustainable energy business park in Wayne County incorporating green houses, multiple wind-powered turbines and dairy operations generating methane gas.

Masters and Gutterman fielded a cornucopia of questions from the audience regarding the impact that cultivating biofuels could have on everything from food prices to wildlife habitat.

Federation member Sally Howard said the environmental group still is trying to figure out its position on biofuels, with Monday night's forum set up for its own members' enlightenment as well as for the public.

MDANEMAN@DemocratandChronicle.com
