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2006-4-4 2:12 PM

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HEARINGS

Ohio's ethanol fuel production industry starting to boom

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Daily Reporter Staff Writer
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With gas prices at their highest levels and concerns increasing about fossil fuels' negative affect on the environment, the outlook could not be better for Ohio's fledgling ethanol production industry.

Ohio is seventh in the nation in growing corn and soybeans, yet has no ethanol fuel refineries. Corn is used in the manufacturing of ethanol-based fuels while soybeans can also be used in other alternative fuels.

Currently, there are only eight gas stations in the entire state where E85, the highest-percentage ethanol gas, is sold. In fact, the 116-flexible fuel vehicle fleet at the state's Department of Agriculture runs on alternative fuels shipped in from other states.

But those statistics are set to change in the next year or two.

Ground already has been broken this year for the construction of three ethanol production facilities, and construction of three more is expected to start before the end of the year. Several others are planned for the future, according to the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

The three facilities under construction in Fayette, Harrison and Allen counties are expected to create a total of more than 150 permanent full-time jobs at the plants and another 2,000-plus jobs in such fields as construction and trucking.

The plants also are expected to be a boon for Ohio farmers.

"For so long, farmers could not compete with gas prices, but once gas hit the \$2 mark, ethanol started sounding like a good idea. It's more affordable and better for the environment," said LeeAnn Mizer, spokeswoman for the Department of Agriculture.

Farmers are indeed playing a major role in ethanol production. The group behind the plant in the town of Cadiz in Harrison County, Harrison Ethanol LLC, is comprised mostly of farmers.

"Everyone involved either lives or has strong roots in Eastern Ohio and we're looking for a way to raise the value of their corn crop five cents or a dime per bushel," said Wendel Dreve, a co-owner of Harrison Ethanol.

Other construction projects that began this year were a plant by Greater Ohio Ethanol in Lima and one by Dallas-based ASAlliance Biofuels LLC near Bloomingburg, which is about 40 miles southwest of Columbus. The facilities are expected to be operational sometime next year.

The Harrison plant is expected to pump \$85 million into the local economy annually, according to Gov. Bob Taft's office.

"This is certainly an economic boost for Ohio," said Mike Wagner, former executive director of the Ohio Corn Growers Association, who even has "Ethanol" as his license plate moniker.

Dreve said Harrison plans to build three more plants in Ohio in the future and, according to its Web site, Greater Ohio Ethanol also plans to build an additional three plants in the state. Representatives from Greater Ohio Ethanol could not be reached for comment as of press time.

Ohio also is home to a Cincinnati-based Peter Cremer North America biodiesel processing

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plant that produced the most biodiesel in the nation last year.

Though the timing may seem perfect given the skyrocketing gas prices in the past year and therefore renewed interest in alternative fuels, getting the Ohio ethanol production facilities built actually has been a long process and started long before the current concerns about Americans' reliance on petroleum.

"The No. 1 objective when I started (in the mid-1980s) was ethanol fuel," said Wagner.

While Ohio farmers struggled with obstacles such as a lack of state ethanol subsidies, the ethanol industry grew in states west of the Mississippi River that had lower corn prices and state subsidies, he said.

Today about 90 percent of ethanol-based fuel still comes from states such as Iowa and Minnesota.

The improvement in the climate for ethanol fuel production in Ohio has been gradual. The state gave job creation tax credits and an investment in training grant to the Harrison project, but the process is still a slow one for fledgling producers.

Dreve said he started looking to build a plant more than four years ago.

"It's been a long process. Because there is not state subsidy - 17 states have some kind of subsidy - Ohio has a disadvantage. But we found investors and found enough money to do a feasibility study and did an economic model and once we got that we realized it might work," said Dreve.

An indication of the length of the process, he said, is that it took "one day short of 18 months to get (Environment Protection Agency) permits."

Advancements in technology, however, have helped Ohio corn growers compete with other states.

"We've been able to make strides because of better efficiencies in manufacturing ethanol. The technology has greatly increased the ethanol we can produce, and there's more demand," said Wagner.

He added that Ohio has one significant advantage over states such as Minnesota, Iowa and South Dakota: it is much closer to the large, fuel-consuming markets of the East Coast.

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