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Cooking oil fuels dreams at a truck stop

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BASSETT, VA. - If you're a bit suspicious of the way fuel prices went up-up-up all summer only to plummet this fall, Dean Price and Gary Sink see you as a potential customer.

The two Piedmont Triad businessmen share your anger at the oil industry's seeming manipulation of the American consumer. But unlike most of us, Price and Sink are working actively to do something about it.

Their novel plan is built around canola, a cover crop you could grow in your backyard this winter, then use either to fry eggs in the kitchen or to make fuel in the garage.

Price and Sink own America's only truck stop where canola-based biodiesel fuel is made, blended and sold on premises. Their first "all-in-one" facility sits on the outskirts of Bassett about 60 miles from Greensboro.

But they hope to franchise their Red Birch prototype in dozens of communities across North Carolina and other parts of the Southeast.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if you saw four or five



N.C. A&T's Abolghasem Shahbazi (left) and Red Birch Energy plant manager Derrick Gortman.

Credit: Jerry Wolford / News & Record

CANOLA TO THE RESCUE

Here's more about the seed that's as helpful in the kitchen as in the garage:

Canola was developed by Canadian scientists in the 1970s from the better-known rapeseed.

Name stands for "Canadian Oil, Low Acid."

Low acidity, low saturated fat, popular cooking oil.

Farmers plant in early October as a winter cover crop.

places like this going through North Carolina on I-95 and each one of them was locally owned?" asked Sink, a Davidson County resident.

Price and Sink also see their Red Birch franchise as a way to help farmers and struggling rural communities by introducing a new winter crop - canola - and an affordable biofuel usable in diesel-powered farm equipment, as well as trucks and cars.

"We're talking about bringing some certainty and stability to the farmer's fuel prices," Stokesdale resident Price said. "It gives them the chance to be energy independent."

Price said the first Red Birch biodiesel outlet wound up in Bassett because the lot had room for a fuel plant next door and because of Virginia's lower fuel taxes, which make it easier for such a startup venture to succeed.

The Red Birch business model is a closed-loop arrangement in which the canola is grown on farms within a reasonable driving distance, processed in a small fuel-making shop beside the truck stop, then blended with regular diesel in underground tanks before it reaches the pumps.

Canola, a derivative of the better-known rapeseed, was invented by Canadian scientists several years ago.

The seed's big benefit is that its oil lacks rapeseed's high acidity, so it is more suitable for both human consumption and producing biodiesel.

It also grows in the winter as a cover crop that doesn't compete for space with many other crops.

"Canola grows incredibly well in North Carolina. We think it could be an excellent cover crop for this state" said Alex Hobbs, a biofuel expert with the N.C. Solar Center in Raleigh.

Price started the venture and began seeking partners several years ago when Hurricane Katrina sent fuel prices skyrocketing at the Bassett truck stop he already owned.

"We ran out of fuel and I realized just how dependent we were," he said. "Our goal at first was just to make this truck stop energy independent."

More profitable than main competitor, winter wheat.

After crushing for fuel oil, seeds provide a high-protein animal feed.

Seeds yield 244 percent more fuel oil than better-known soybean.

Canola fuel runs better in cold weather than soy biodiesel.

Easier engine starts, quieter operation than either petroleum or soy biodiesel.

Source: N.C. Solar Center

But as they gathered more information about canola, Price and Sink felt the tug of a larger vision.

They imagined a chain of Red Birch franchises strung along interstates and other major highways, many in rural locations where they might be owned by area farmers or farm cooperatives.

Their vision works on an entirely different model than the norm for making and selling fuel, whether the end product is ethanol, biodiesel or gasoline.

Most such projects are built around a large-scale refinery miles from the service stations where the product eventually is sold.

But Price and Sink asked, "What if you brought the seeds directly to the point of sale, then crushed them for oil and processed the oil in a small plant right next door?"

Nearby farmer-owners would grow canola each winter as a cash crop for conversion to fuel, get back the crushed remains of processed seeds they could feed to livestock or poultry, tap some of the Red Birch biodiesel to run their own agricultural equipment and sell the rest to truckers and motorists.

On the truck-stop end, buying canola seeds and making biodiesel next door cuts out heavy transportation costs on both ends of the fuel-making process. So the biodiesel can be sold profitably for a lower price.

At the Bassett prototype, Red Birch's fuel-making shop simply "sells" its freshly made biodiesel to the Red Birch truck stop for the price of regular diesel on that particular day.

The truck stop blends the biodiesel into a mix that's 80 percent regular diesel, selling it to consumers at the same price it would sell full-petroleum diesel.

Biodiesel is interchangeable with regular diesel, particularly in such an 80-20 blend.

The Red Birch plan definitely could find a place in North Carolina's efforts to make a significant dent in the 5.6 billion gallons of fuel it imports every year, said Randall Johnson of the N.C. Biotechnology Center.

"It's an idea that has captured a lot of interest in rural areas where they've had large-scale (ethanol or biodiesel) projects announced but never completed," Johnson said.

In such a setting along the interstate, an "all-in-one" truck stop might prosper with business from nearby rural residents, interstate motorists and truckers, and commuters from larger metropolitan areas in the vicinity, Johnson said.

The Red Birch partners are still in the formative stages of their plan, so it's hard to say what their chances of success are.

They've assembled a small network of several dozen farms raising canola for them from southern Virginia through the Carolinas, including growers in Browns Summit, Reidsville and Madison.

But they are still working the kinks out of their prototype in Bassett and have yet to sign up any franchisees.

The idea shines so brightly and promises to help so many people, it's worth all the time and money the partners have invested, Sink said.

"It didn't take me long to fall in love with this idea," he said, "because it could be so very good for our nation."

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