

# Ethanol Entrepreneurs Making Their Moves

By GREG BLUESTEIN – 3 days ago

TIFTON, Ga. (AP) — The newspaper publisher, the watermelon farmer, the metal fabricator and the housewife gathered about a year ago and decided to take the plunge into the business of biofuels.

Yes, the nearest ethanol pump to their central Georgia town of Dublin was 45 miles away. And yes, they didn't know much about the ethanol industry. But it was as much a philosophical matter as an entrepreneurial one: They were tired of waiting for big corporations to act first.

"We're trying to take care of our families, our communities," said Buddy Coleman, the metal fabricator who is helping design the medium-sized still they're building. "It's going to take it all. Big guys and little guys. It's going to take all of it to fuel this demand, for us to be independent."

Across the country, small entrepreneurs are creating their own answers to the nation's fuel crunch, turning fruit juices, tree scraps, stale beer and flat soft drinks into fuel. And while big producers are driving much of the biofuels' growth, it's these garage-level entrepreneurs that have helped sustain the industry over the last few decades.

Ethanol producers produced just under 5 billion gallons of the fuel in 2006 and will be producing about 6.5 billion gallons this year, according to the Renewable Fuels Association, a trade association representing the U.S. ethanol industry.

"It will take everybody to make this movement work," said Hartwig, the group's spokesman. "I'm not speaking strictly about ethanol. We're going to need ethanol production, biodiesel production and new technologies. We're going to need it all if we're going to achieve the goals most Americans say they want to achieve."

Between 1995 and 2005, the industry was dominated by farmers and local investors who pooled their resources to build ethanol stills, said Brian Jennings, the executive vice president of the American Coalition for Ethanol, an industry trade group.

Federal legislation passed in 2005 designed to encourage more homegrown fuel and rising crude oil prices have brought with it more interest from venture capitalists, public companies and Wall Street investors. Still, though, roughly 40 percent of the nation's total ethanol production capacity is controlled by small businesses, Jennings said.

"The trend has changed a bit nationwide, but we still have an ethanol industry with a variety of business models and investment sources, and I think that makes for a strong industry," he said.

The grassroots ethanol movement was on display at the Southeastern Biofuels Conference held in southwest Georgia's Tifton last month.

The lawn outside the convention hall boasted cars that run on watermelons, fruit juice, wood chips and other household items. Entrepreneurs roamed the grounds looking for ways to invest in biofuels, talking with government officials and others about how to make the most of their capital. And teachers led seminars on how to include alternative fuels in their lesson plans.

"The kids thought it was interesting they ate their french fries at lunch with vegetable oil and then they made fuel with it in the afternoon," said Erin Gawron, who teaches at Heritage High School in east Georgia's Rockdale County.

Landon Alberson told the group how he taught his students to make homemade biodiesel, a process that starts in a two-liter soft drink bottle and ends in a vat outside Berrien High School, the southwest Georgia school where he teaches.

Justin Williams, one of his students, said the class has helped him discover he wants to work in biofuels after college.

"I just want to come up with new stuff and better stuff," he said.

He's already well on his way. He engineered a filter — well, actually a pair of jeans — that cleans dirty restaurant grease and turns it into vegetable oil.

Experts caution against experimenting with creating the fuels — or using them in vehicles — without professional guidance. And manufacturers must meet a set of environmental standards before acquiring the state permits needed to set up shop.

The Dublin project took hold after Hurricane Katrina sent gas prices soaring and Griffin Lovett, a publisher of the Dublin Courier-Herald, grew worried his newspaper carriers were feeling the pinch. He and his wife Dianne, who grows watermelons, decided to buy a still that can churn out five gallons of ethanol an hour on a plot of land in the central Georgia town.

As his vision grew, so did his team. He joined up with Coleman and his wife Melody, and they got to work designing a a much larger still that can generate up to 75 gallons of the fuel an hour.

Griffin Lovett's got big plans for the still. He could one day sell the ethanol to a wholesaler or use it to fuel the carriers' cars, but for now he's weighing his options. The newspaper has already purchased a 2001 Ford Focus and attached an ethanol converter, which he fills up at a pump about 45 miles away — one of only a half-dozen or so in Georgia.

"It feels like a lonely battle sometimes," said Lovett.

But he and his partners say at least they know they're doing what they can.

As Dianne Lovett says, "We're a little part of a big difference."

On the Net:

- Renewable Fuels Association: <http://www.ethanolrfa.org/>



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