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State looking into biofuel program
By: Harlan Levy, Journal Inquirer

Connecticut could host a thriving, profitable, and environmentally responsible alternative fuel industry which would lessen dependence on foreign oil, speakers at a biofuels symposium at the University of Connecticut said Thursday.

Connecticut currently imports all of its energy, half in the form of petroleum products. But the state can significantly reduce its imports by using home-grown biofuels to power state and municipal vehicles and to heat state and municipal offices, schools, and other facilities, the speakers said.

Connecticut's government market supplies the demand. All that's needed is the supply, symposium speakers said.

"The state burns fuel oil to heat its buildings, including the university's buildings," state Department of Economic and Community Development Managing Economist Stanley McMillen said. "They have a fleet of trucks that currently burns a 20 percent blend of conventional diesel fuel and biodiesel, and the state is sending money out of state to buy the fuel oil and diesel fuel that it needs. If we produce some of that fuel, we could recycle those dollars in the state and create jobs."

It takes establishing a market, McMillen said, "and we are beginning to do it."

The General Assembly already has several bills providing the necessary tax incentives, grants, and low-cost loans for farmers and investors in biofuel production plants.

Making biofuels is relatively simple: They are made by fermenting the sugars in corn, beets, cane, or other crops into ethanol, which is then blended into gasoline. A more energetic biofuel is biodiesel, made from vegetable oils such as soy, canola, or restaurant waste oil. Biodiesel is blended with petroleum fuels for use in home heating and as diesel vehicle fuel, which greatly reduces harmful emissions such as soot, sulfur and hydrocarbons are greatly reduced.

The UConn Biofuels Consortium - which produces 50 gallons of biodiesel a week from restaurant waste oil for use in UConn vehicles - estimates that 15 percent of imported petroleum fuels could be displaced if 10 percent of the state's land is used to cultivate energy crops which are converted to ethanol and biodiesel. "We estimate that the displacement of petroleum could surpass 25 percent using 10 percent of our land, as new agricultural technologies are developed in the next 10 years," said Richard Parnas, director of chemical engineering at UConn and head of UConn's biofuels consortium.

State Rep. Bryan Hurlburt, D-Tolland, has already sponsored a bill this legislative session that provides key incentives for creating an in-state biofuels industry.

"It creates a standard of quality, and it deals with tax incentives for producers and consumers, mandates biofuel use for state facilities and state fleets, and gives incentives for local municipalities and school boards of education to start transitioning into biofuel," Hurlburt said.

"We have an unprecedented opportunity to create new jobs in the state, preserve open space, and revitalize the agriculture sector alongside industrial development," Parnas said.

"I don't think it will happen overnight," Hurlburt said, "but if we can put the right tools in place, the industry will develop over the course of the next year or two.