Biofuel options good for South Carolina

Locally grown feedstocks

By Peter Hull
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If a major biofuels refinery is built in South Carolina, it likely will source raw material from Palmetto State fields — an enormous opportunity for the state’s growers, a Clemson alternative energy researcher says.

Transportation costs associated with importing large quantities of sugar cane from Brazil or corn and soybeans from the Midwest into the state would be cost prohibitive, said Clemson Agronomist James Frederick, who studies the science and technology of utilizing plants for food and fuel, among other applications.

“It has to be a locally grown crop to be economically viable,” Frederick says.

In opening the 2008 South Carolina Bio-Energy Summit at the Clemson University Pee Dee Research and Education Center, Frederick asked which of the locally grown feedstocks displayed on the stage were suitable for biofuels production.

Among them were corn, soybeans and wood chips, and the answer was “all of them,” Frederick said, because the future of biofuels is likely a combined effort of numerous crops.

The summit highlighted the diversity of feedstocks that can be produced in South Carolina for bio-energy. Industry and government leaders discussed the latest research and the future of bio-energy in the state.

The day-long event, which included a field trip to the center’s switchgrass fields, was attended by more than 130 people.

Sen. Hugh Leatherman, whose district includes Darlington and Florence counties, said the biofuels industry could provide significant economic development opportunities for South Carolina.

Research to determine the best crops for biofuels production and how the state can make the most of its resources must continue, he said.

Those sentiments were underscored by John Clark, director of the South Carolina Energy Office in Columbia.

Clark said South Carolina ranks fifth in the nation for the amount of electricity used per capita. The majority of energy used in the state is in transportation fuels and industrial consumption, he said.

While the state relies heavily on nuclear power to generate electricity, it also uses a large amount of coal — and South Carolina doesn’t produce coal, Clark said. “Biomass turns coal on its head,” Clark said.

South Carolina is home to corn, soybeans, switchgrass and a host of other crops that can be used for alternative fuels.

“Biofuels are good in every way,” Clark said. “They’re good for energy, good for the environment and they’re good for the economy of South Carolina.”

More than 1.5 percent of transportation fuels sold in South Carolina are from biofuels, Clark said. “And, we have to keep the manufacture and use of biofuels moving,” he added.