Summit fuels interest in crops

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Clemson University’s Pee Dee Research and Education Center held the 2008 South Carolina Bio-Energy Summit on Thursday to inform local farmers about the benefits of biofuel crops.

Dr. Jim Frederick, professor of biofuel crop production and plant physiology in the center, was one of the event organizers. He said the event was a great success, with farmers and local politicians gathering to learn more about potential economic solutions for the Pee Dee.

“There is a lot of interest in biofuels from all different facets of society,” he said. “This is an opportunity for them all together and talk about what each other’s plans are. It’s a way to cover so many areas of economic, society, environmental aspects.”

Farmer and activist Chris Way is one of the most prominent leaders on the minds of the public in light of the gasoline supply scare in the wake of Hurricane Ike, Frederick said. “Last week, I think, kind of makes you think about offshore drilling and how vulnerable we are to hurricanes,” he said. “It has a big impact on our economy. It shows you how reliant we are on foreign oil.”

Butterflies are a good alternative to replace fossil fuels, Frederick said. “Biofuels will be local, because it is only so far you can ship them to the refinery and still be economical,” he said.

Right now, Frederick said, growers in the United States are shipping those biofuel crops to Europe, where the demand is very high.

“Their is a pretty big demand for biofuels over there,” he said. “They’re ahead of us in terms of biofuel usage, but we’re heading there very quickly.”

State Rep. Robert Williams of Darlington County, said he thinks the summit was a great chance for people to come together and plan for the future. “I really think this is a good summit,” he said. “I think the community needs to be involved in what’s going on as it relates to our energy shortage and pricing that will gradually increase over the years. This is a very good place to start, where we can bring some of those ideas together and shape our future.”

Williams wasn’t the only government official who participated in the summit. Hugh Weathers, S.C. Department of Agriculture commissioner, was the keynote speaker.

Weathers talked about breathing new life into the South Carolina farming culture by engaging young people in the farming culture and guiding them into a life of agricultural study.

“That’s what this conference really represents, the awareness of the future in terms of energy applications for the future,” he said.

Several programs already are in effect in the Palmetto State to encourage people to use the abundance of locally grown foods available in South Carolina, Weathers said.

These attending the South Carolina Bio-Energy Summit listen to Dr. Jim Frederick talk about the potential of switchgrass as a biofuel while touring the Clemson Extension Pee Dee Research and Education Center during the South Carolina Bio-Energy Summit.