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GIVE & TAKE

Tennessee to Construct Ethanol Refinery

By GOLDIE BLUMENSTYK

The University of Tennessee has caught the biofuel bug.

The institution will soon begin construction on a small-scale ethanol refinery on a site about 30 miles south of the flagship campus, in Knoxville. The project is a joint venture with a Massachusetts company that specializes in developing ethanol from switch grass and other cellulosic material.

The university plans to use the experimental refinery as a test bed for an array of research projects on biofuels, in the hope of developing scientific processes and distribution models that could eventually encourage new businesses to build commercial refineries in the state.

While the research refinery may eventually turn a profit, university officials see it primarily as an economic-development effort.

Officials also hope to encourage Tennessee farmers to cultivate enough switch grass to provide fuel for the experimental plant as well as for future commercial ones.

The state has given the university \$8-million to oversee an incentive program to encourage farmers to plant switch grass — the university hopes to eventually have access to 8,000 acres of the crop — and \$16-million to finance research at the refinery over the next five years.

State funds, approved by the legislature this year, will cover \$40.7-million of the construction costs. All additional costs, estimated at \$40-million to \$60-million, will be borne by the joint-venture partner, Mascoma Corporation, of Cambridge, Mass. The company will also provide funds to operate the facility, which is expected to produce five million gallons of ethanol a year, about one-tenth as much as a typical commercial plant.

The university itself may become a customer. Some of its cars, including that of David E. Millhorn, vice president for research, run on a blend of gasoline and ethanol.

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