



Value-Added Ag Businesses Take Center Stage

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by Natalie J. Ostgaard, City Editor

Polk County commissioners were updated Tuesday on the progress of two proposed value-added agricultural businesses that would be located in the county. Don Sargeant, consultant and chairman of Agassiz Energy LLC, filled the board in on the proposed ethanol plant near Erskine and Bryan Boll, a co-owner of Gentilly Cattle LLC, talked about the proposed feedlot next to the Polk County Landfill.

Both men stressed that their visits were intended to be purely informational, as commissioners could soon be bombarded with questions on the projects.

"This way, while you may not know the exact answer, you can direct them where to find it," said Sargeant.

As for the ethanol plant, soil test borings were to be done Wednesday, moving the project further along, though slowly, Sargeant acknowledged. The process of working on the environmental assessment worksheet and securing necessary permits is a long one, he said, but the company hopes to soon file an equity plan with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Current plans are for a 52-million gallon annual production plant. However, Sargeant said, "this thing is huge, and we could actually see 70-million gallons produced."

Growers could see an extra 5 to 10 cents per bushel for their corn, he added. Economic development for the whole region would also trickle down, as many new jobs, in addition to the 35-plus at the ethanol plant, would be created within a 60-mile radius.

A new one-mile road will be needed to handle 10-ton trucks entering the plant from Highways 2 and 59, where both Burlington Northern-Santa Fe and Canadian Pacific Railroads have access. When the time comes, the company will ask the county to build this road, he added.

Another issue, one of the biggest according to Sargeant, is the fly ash produced by burning coal at the plant. Where would it all go?

"We do hope to utilize the ash somehow," said Sargeant.

If that's not possible, he said one option is to use the county's landfill. However, Bill Wilson, solid waste manager for the county, said this could have a detrimental environmental impact on the landfill.

"An initial look shows that we'd take the life of the landfill from 30-plus years down to less than 10," he said. "That's the direction we probably don't want to go. Our philosophy has always been to extend the life of the landfill. That's why we burn trash at the incinerator in Fosston."

A landfill consultant is examining the matter and should have a recommendation at the next board meeting in two weeks, Wilson added. Another option would be for Agassiz Energy to have its own landfill, which might actually cost less.

When his turn before the board came, Boll mentioned another use for fly ash: It could be mixed with soil to help preserve the ground for cattle.

"We'll have to look into this possibility as we move along," he said. "There are, no doubt, several ways the ethanol plant and feedlot can benefit each other."

Another ethanol byproduct is distiller's grain, which Boll said could provide a food source for the cows along with beet pulp from American Crystal Sugar.

The group has applied for a conditional use permit from the county, he explained, although "everything is held up until the EAW is complete and the state issues the permit." There would then be a six-month waiting period before the project could break ground.

Disposal of manure is a big issue with feedlots, said Boll, and Gentilly Cattle is currently working with Widseth Smith Nolting to design a storage facility that properly contains the solids, possibly with grass waterways.

Originally, the group planned for a 5,000-head facility. However, "we were told by the MPCA to permit for as many cattle as you think you can possibly have at any one time," so it's grown to a 6,000-unit feedlot. While that size is large for northern Minnesota, Boll said farther south that would be considered small.

"Size is relative to where you're at," he said.

Instead of hiring a consultant to study the environmental aspects of the project, as the group originally intended, Boll said he chose to take a hands-on approach and do much of the work himself, which has taught him much about regulations. He acknowledged that the project would be moving much faster, though, if a consultant was involved.