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Contact: Allen Smith, 979-846-0819 EXT 2
allen.smith@tx.usda.gov

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Dee Ann Littlefield, 940-538-4681
deeann.littlefield@tx.usda.gov

Modern Day Spindle Top

Mustang Creek Biofuel Plant, in Leona, Texas, broke ground on June 5, 2009 to begin construction of the nation's first cellulose biogas plant. While the modern oil industry was born on a hill near Beaumont, Texas, in 1901, this biogas plant represents the future of energy in America.

“Texas had the first Spindle Top which created an oil industry that revolutionized our civilization,” says USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Texas State Conservationist Don Gohmert. “This is Texas' second Spindle Top, as it will become a long term very reliable way to produce fuel that will energize America.”

The plant will have the capability of producing 1 MW of electricity, enough to power approximately 400 homes year round. Houston County Utility has already contracted to buy the electricity.

The bio-energy plant will use hybrid forage sorghum, developed by MMR Genetics, for its fuel source. Processes in the plant will create biomethane, which can be sold in gas form, or can be piped to generators on site that burn the gas to produce the electricity.

Unlike food crops grown for energy production, the hybrid forage sorghum is a type of grass, so no valuable food sources are used to generate the electricity. No water is used in the digestion production process, but because on average, silage 67 percent moisture, water is a byproduct. This water, with valuable minerals and nutrients left in the digestate, will be applied back to the land.

Helping People Help the Land

Additionally, the 2,400 acres of sorghum silage dedicate to this project are going to be grown on fallowed farm land, so no farm land was taken out of current crop production.

“This is a landmark renewable energy project for the U.S. and the ag industry,” Gohmert. “This has the potential to revitalize agriculture as millions of acres that could no longer produce profitable commodity crops, now have a new opportunity for income.”

This clean renewable energy project is the brainchild of farmers George King and Buddy Alders of the Madisonville, Texas area. They consulted with representatives from the NRCS to help get their idea off the ground.

Allen Smith, coordinator of the Post Oak Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), a branch of the NRCS, has been working with Alders and King for over two years, helping to provide grant research, soil and plant science data and other information to help them achieve their goals of green, clean energy. Their combined research led them to Germany, where they toured biogas plants, after which they are modeling the Mustang Creek Plant.

“This project represents the opportunities and solutions that agriculture can provide for energy security and sustainability, while conserving our natural resources,” Smith says.

Within the next year, four more new plants will begin construction all in the central Texas. In the next eight years, King and Alders have plans to have 50 plants up and running throughout central Texas.