

On-farm energy by any means possible

BY KIRK HEINZE

Jim and Russell Rasch can produce 200,000 gallons of ethanol annually on their Conklin farm. That would be 200,000 gallons of eco-friendly biofuel that would provide their own fuel needs and make a dent in U.S. dependency on foreign oil. In fact, there would be enough ethanol to sell to neighbors, thereby establishing a close-to-home ethanol economy at a time when everyone is touting "buy local."

But the Rasches are producing exactly

zero gallons of ethanol. Why? Because their township has passed an ordinance that shut down the Rasch ethanol production facility about two years ago—citing vaguely defined safety and environmental concerns.

"We started producing ethanol in late 2005, distilling 10 bushels of corn at a time," Russell recalled. "We got about 25 gallons for every 10 bushels and, in the process, we worked out all the bugs in the processing system."

"We used online information we found

by surfing the Web, and our local MSU Extension people also helped us locate resources to guide our efforts."

By the end of 2006, the Rasches had become confident enough in their ethanol production expertise to expand the processing facility—converting an empty hog confinement barn. They were soon producing a high-grade ethanol—92 percent—and encountering no problems whatsoever.

There were no local or state restrictions on biofuels production, and the only federal mandate was to register the processing facility with the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB).

"That is why the township action is so frustrating," Russell said. "It's as if the township has passed the ordinance to specifically target our farm. We have tried to work out some mutually acceptable solution, but they don't want to talk to us."

Also during this time, the Rasch initiative became intriguing to Ottawa County MSU Extension director Adam Kantrovich and Extension educator Charles Gould. They recognized the economic potential of on-farm ethanol production and developed their own ethanol and biodiesel processing units—using a grant from Project GREEN to help fund the ethanol unit.

"We saw what Jim and Russell were doing, and we decided to develop processing systems that could be used to teach others how to set up biofuel production on their farms," Gould said. "We also wanted to get some first-hand experience in processing to ensure safety and product quality."

The two units can produce 50 gallons of biodiesel each day and 50 gallons of ethanol every other day. Things have gone so well that Gould and Kantrovich plan to move their processing units to the MSU bioeconomy research center in Holland, where they will become the centerpieces of classes on biofuel production.

Meanwhile, the Rasches have given up trying to negotiate some agreement with township authorities to resume ethanol production.

The future of their enterprise (along with many those of many others) may rest with legislation recently introduced in the Michigan House and Senate. HB 4838, introduced by Rep. Arlan Meekhof (R-Olive Twp) and SB 594, introduced by Sen. Wayne Kuipers (R-Holland), would amend



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the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act to allow the production of ethanol in zoned agricultural land.

The legislation requires that processing facilities are not adjacent to residential land and will not produce more than 100,000 gallons of ethanol annually. Michigan Farm Bureau supports both bills.

Not content to sit idly by while the bills make their way through the legislative process, Jim and Russell are moving forward on the alternative energy front. They have a wind turbine ready to erect on the farm—a turbine that will provide a good deal of their electrical needs—and power the ethanol processing unit once they are again up and running.

How is that for entrepreneurial spirit!

Sikkemas

CONTINUED FROM 19

do it cheaper than us, but as the years have gone by, I believe our position is the best position,” he said. “I think we get appreciation from our customers who realize we’re here to serve them, and the money is secondary. I ask people who don’t believe that to come and experience our business at Expo.”

Of course, farmers can visit with Sikkema Equipment at one of six other farm shows where he exhibits across the nation, but the roots of his business promotion remain planted at Expo.

“We hold Expo dear to our hearts,” he said, “because it’s always been a good show for us whether we sell anything or not. It renews our relationships with the customer base that’s nearest and dearest to our hearts - the people of Michigan. And if I had to come out with one simple statement as to how I would want people to look at me and my business - without making it sound like the epitaph on my tombstone - it would be ‘at the end of the day, I want people who know me and/or our company to feel absolutely blessed by that relationship, and that in some way God was glorified.’”

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