

Ethanol plant to bring energy solutions, jobs - Sault Ste. Marie, MI - Sault Ste. Marie Evening News by Scott Brand

KINROSS TOWNSHIP — “We’re not the only solution, but we’re part of the solution,” said Senior Vice President, Operations Alan Belcher of Mascoma Corporation in a Monday visit to the offices of The Evening News. “The focus is to reduce the amount we have to buy from foreign countries.”

And a major portion of that solution is growing right here in the Eastern Upper Peninsula in the form of maple, birch, oak and aspen trees.

“There’s a well-established supply chain,” said CEO Stephen Hicks of Frontier Renewable Resources, noting there are enough loggers and truck drivers to meet the need once the site is fully operational. “The hard wood feed stock is available in abundance,” Belcher added. “We’ll grow substantially more than we’ll harvest.”

The Great Lakes Basin was the likely site for a new facility from the get-go, but Kinross became the leading candidate for this project after nearly two dozen sites were explored. Ample area for growth, plenty of trees, good utilities and a road network moved the area to the top of the list during the research phase. The proposed site, 355 acres just east of Gaines Highway and north of M-80, also has a nearby railroad track which will be extended to provide another shipping option.

The success of this particular project hinges on Mascoma’s patented technology — called consolidated bio-processing — which rapidly breaks down components of cellulosic biomass and converts the sugars into ethanol. Belcher indicated that existing practices require enzymes and 150 hours to convert the wood into a usable fuel, contrasting the process with the newly-developed operation his company is piloting which requires about 90 hours and totally eliminates the need for the enzyme. “To put it another way, wood ethanol currently costs approximately \$3.00 a gallon to produce. Once the Kinross facility is up and running at full speed, the same product can be made for about \$1.60 a gallon,” said Belcher.

Hicks was quick to point out that the harvesting of wood will be done in a manner that is self-sustaining and environmentally sound. “We are not clear-cutting — there will be no pesticides or herbicides,” he said. “From the stump to the pump we’ll be as green and low carbon as you can get.”

Belcher, Hicks and company were in the Sault on Monday to update the community on the progress being made to bring this facility to Chippewa County. While there was initially a great deal of excitement when the plans were announced last fall, there has been very little visible activity since that point in time. “We’ve done a lot of upfront work,” Hicks explained, saying millions have been spent in preparation for the project.

The current timetable calls for construction to begin at the site at the end of March or early April of 2010. Projections call for somewhere between 150-200 construction jobs over a two-year period to build the facility. Once the work is complete, it will take 50-60 employees to operate the facility with another 500-700 jobs anticipated in various capacities such as loggers, truck drivers and support staff for these operations to feed wood into the ethanol plant.

“We’ve been at this for about six months,” said Hicks explaining the reason for the update during Monday’s visit. “We wanted to tell folks where we are and where we are going.”