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Bringing a good idea to market ... with a little help from some friends

Lesser Slave Lake Economic Alliance supports regional initiative

Solid support is helping bringing life and potential success to a good idea that's been germinating in the High Prairie area.

Stan Peacock, a cattle and hay producer here since 1972, wasn't alone in his struggles to make a go of it. But initiative and innovation will set him apart.

That, and a little help from his friends.

Uncooperative weather and high input costs in the farming business sparked Peacock's interest in biofuels a few years ago. He started exploring ways he could move his farm away from being cattle-dependant.

It has led him to what he believes is a promising new crop: Stinkweed. Or, to be specific, Pennycress (*Thlaspi arvense*).

He has met with a lot of skepticism along the way – though there is less today than there used to be.

The Lesser Slave Lake Economic Alliance (LSLEA) was quick to appreciate the merit of the initiative, says Chair Alvin Billings.

Together with the Peace Region Economic Development Alliance (PREDA), LSLEA is supporting research on Pennycress agronomics and has put funds toward what Billings believes is a viable regional innovation.

“The goal is to evaluate the potential of pennycress for development into a viable commercial source of oil for biodiesel,” he explains.

Research work will evaluate Pennycress yields on marginal lands as well as the economic feasibility of harvesting of wild stands of Pennycress using conventional combines.

Billings says the project will evaluate a two crop per year growing system.

Constructing a new agribusiness around field Pennycress won't happen overnight. But the project is moving relatively quickly, he says.

The ultimate goal is to contribute to building a stronger, more self-sufficient rural community by way of a community-based biodiesel production model.

“A community-based biodiesel distribution program will benefit local economies, from the farmers growing the feedstock to local businesses producing and distributing the fuel to the end consumer,” says Billings. The money will stay in the community while reducing impact on the local environment.

“LSLEA and PREDA funding has moved the research forward,” says Peacock. “It funded field testing at the Olds College School of Innovation and Alberta Agriculture's Special Crops Branch.”

Peacock is about to close a land deal in his bid to open a \$35 million crushing and biodiesel production plant in the Peace country. If the project moves at the pace he hopes, the plant could be operational by mid-2010.

It is projected that within five years 40,000 hectares of Pennycress will be required to produce 26 million litres of biodiesel per year with an annual cash value of \$52 million. Pennycress grows across Canada, particularly on the heavier soils of the prairies. Project supporters believe Pennycress could make the leap to commercialization unusually fast because it already grows wild and prolifically throughout Canada, says Billings.

Food vs. Fuel

The initiative has significant merit, say stakeholders. As a non-edible oil seed, Pennycress could substitute canola (with value as a human food source) as a feedstock for biofuel production. Since Pennycress can grow on marginal lands, it won't compete for arable land intended for food production.

"Agriculture is moving to a focus on energy and biofuels and it means new crops need to be cultivated to meet new demands," says Kwesi Ampong-Nyarko, a special crops research scientist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development.

"What was a weed in the past could be a crop now."

Ampong-Nyarko is excited about the initiative, particularly as a winter crop.

His work will explore Pennycress on a large scale, and will be the basis for implementing improvements in crop production. Ampong-Nyarko is working out of his research facility in Edmonton in tandem with field testing in the Peace.

Experiments in the greenhouse showed Pennycress controls weeds very well and the meal residue can also be used as a fertilizer, he explains. Alberta Agriculture is helping to put together a feasibility study that will develop a business model for Pennycress as an alternative feedstock in biofuel production.

While Ampong-Nyarko works on crop yields, the Olds College School of Innovation has been looking at developing a best practices model for commercial production of Pennycress.

Tanya McDonald, a bioenergy research scientist at the college thinks there is "huge potential" for Pennycress.

Olds College research is exploring the quality of seed and the oil, she said, and how growing conditions and harvest times have an impact.

McDonald and Olds College students are researching how Pennycress meal (the byproduct of oilseed pressing) might be used for bioherbicide, biopesticide and possibly even feedstock applications.

"The quality of Pennycress oil has significant advantages over other oilseed crops particularly for biodiesel use in a cold climate," she says. "There's lots of potential there and lots of questions that need to be answered.

"We'll find the answers that will help pave the way to make it commercially viable."

Alberta Agriculture's Ampong-Nyarko says the idea would still "only be a dream" without the help of LSLEA and others.

"We're proud that both the alliances have helped enable this project to move forward," says LSLEA's Billings. "As a regional economic development alliance with a mandate to spur regional initiatives, we're happy to be on board."

Billings encourages others to come forward to learn about the services LSLEA offers.

For more information, call the Lesser Slave Lake Economic Alliance at 780-523-6563 or visit www.lislea.ca.

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