

Commissioners OK Biodiesel Project

By Sharon McBrayer

Commissioners on Monday agreed to put money toward expanding facilities at the county EcoComplex.

Catawba County Board of Commissioners voted 3-1, with Randall Isenhower voting against the measure, to award a construction bid to Hamlett Associates, Inc. of Climax for \$775,786 to build a crop processing facility at its Biodiesel Research Facility.

Commissioner Barbara Beatty was absent from the meeting. Commissioners also approved a contract for administration and construction observation with McGill Associates, PA in the amount of \$55,000. The board had to approve a budget revision, using solid waste post closure reserve funds, for the two contracts in the amount of \$830,790.

County officials have said no local tax money will be used for the project. The money is coming from solid waste fees, officials say.

The crop processing facility will clean, dry, store and crush harvested seed crop, officials say. The county will produce biodiesel fuel from crops grown at the EcoComplex.

Barry Edwards, director of utilities and engineering for the county, said the biodiesel fuel would come from canola and sunflowers planted at the EcoComplex. The fuel produced will be used at the complex, say officials.

An agreement with Appalachian State University gives the county annual revenue of \$127,994, with expenses for the operation estimated at \$45,000, Edwards told commissioners.

Commissioner Dan Hunsucker asked Edwards how the process will benefit county residents. Edwards said it could help keep landfill and solid waste fee structure rates down and help the air quality and negate pollution.

Isenhower said he would vote against the project because he's not sure it serves a core government function.

Commissioner Chair Kitty Barnes said the county is mandated to deal with solid waste. She said there's also an economic development aspect to the EcoComplex because businesses have located there.