

The Future of Farming

By Gina Lindsey

How do sunflowers, tractors and Catawba County's Eco-Complex fit together? That's what many farmers attending the county Farm Bureau's meeting on Monday night were eager to find out.

Barry Edwards, county director of utilities and engineering, gave a presentation about the Eco-Complex and its agricultural experiments and biodiesel production.

The cost of diesel fuel continues to be a large factor in price of growing and harvesting crops, which subsequently impacts the price of goods in the grocery stores. Edwards told farmers the research on biofuels will help them determine whether it would be a viable alternative to standard diesel for use in tractors and other equipment.

In July, the county commissioners approved a \$3 million, 5,000 square-foot facility to test biodiesel fuel produced from crops around the Blackburn Landfill. It's one of many projects taking place off the county's property off Rocky Ford Road.

The county is working with Appalachian State University to test the fuel produced from the county's canola and sunflower crops. The university is also sharing the cost of the research facility. Until it's completed, the crops are tested at ASU in Boone.

The Eco-Complex is a developing center for green energy, and agricultural and environmental innovation, according to Edwards. "We are creating a centralized location for research on all aspects of natural energy recovery and utilization, as well as research of alternative fuels and minimization of greenhouse gases for environmental, agricultural and energy use," he said earlier this year.

Edwards said the Eco-Complex will be testing the amount of energy produced from biodiesel grades B5, B10 and B20. B5 means the fuel is 95 percent diesel and 5 percent alternative fuel. It's important for farmers to know how well these grades will power heavy farm machinery and if the fuel is practical in farm use. The county is currently testing biofuel, made from a canola harvested in early July.

Edwards said the use of county-produced biodiesel is actually cheaper than diesel. He said earlier this year that the project will produce about 30,000 gallons of biodiesel each year at a cost of about \$2.25 per gallon. Regular diesel is currently averaging \$4.11 per gallon in North Carolina.

Canola produces about 102 gallons of fuel per acre of crop, compared to peanuts that make about 90 gallons per acre and sunflowers at 82 gallons per acre.

Farmers were also interested to know that the fuel's byproduct of meal can be beneficial as feed for animals, with 40 percent protein content that is comparable to soybean.