

U.S. Energy Department Going Greener

By Amit Agarwal

The U.S. Department of Energy has announced a \$375 million plan for three new biofuel research centers in Tennessee, Wisconsin, and California. The department has granted \$125 million to each center, and universities will play major roles in their operations. The centers will also partner with national laboratories and private companies.

The consortia at each center will research ways to convert switchgrass, poplar trees, and other plants other than corn into ethanol for the purpose of fueling vehicles. The \$125 million grant for biofuel technology research will be utilized over a period of five years.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison will head the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center. Its academic partners will be Michigan State University, Illinois State University, Iowa State University, and the University of Florida. Other partners will include the Energy Department's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, Lucigen Corporation, and Oak Ridge National Laboratory-an Energy Department facility in Tennessee.

Oak Ridge National Laboratory will lead the Bioenergy Science Center. Its partners include Dartmouth College, the University of Georgia, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and the Energy Department's National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

A third center headed by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory managed by the University of California system will be run in collaboration with Stanford University and the University of California campuses at Berkeley and Davis. Located in Berkeley, California, the Joint BioEnergy Institute will also partner with Sandia National Laboratories and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

The projects are aimed at improving methods for cost-effectively creating fuel from the cellulose found in plant parts such as stalks and stems. According to studies, cellulosic ethanol could generate four to six times the energy spent to produce it and produce fewer greenhouse gas emissions than corn-based ethanol.

The move is part of the Bush administration's plan to reduce gasoline consumption by 20% during the next 20 years. While the Energy Department had originally planned to open two research centers, Bush administration officials later contributed funding for a third.