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Fuelling ideas

Billie Harrison

THE recipe for biofuel is simple: mix 100 kilograms of vegetable oil and 10 kilograms of methanol together with a catalyst and out comes 100 kilograms on biodiesel and 10 kilograms of glycerol.

Unfortunately the recipe to make it a viable alternative fuel for the transportation market is not so easy, especially in Australia.

South Australian Nuffield Scholar Caroline Brown from Maitland on Yorke Peninsula spoke to fellow scholars and representatives from Eyre Peninsula's agricultural industry about her study of biofuels around the world as part of the 2007 Nuffield Australia Autumn Tour on Friday.

Biofuel is one of three projects local agricultural group F.R.E.E. Eyre Limited has identified for a feasibility study to help Eyre Peninsula farmers add value to their products.

Cleve farmer Ben Ranford, a member of the F.R.E.E. Eyre Limited steering committee, said the business could learn a lot from Ms Brown's research and her vision for the future of Australia's biofuel industry.

"It looks like her study tour has scoped renewable energy further than we'd even thought about," Mr Ranford said. "If she could share some of her information with us it would be such an assistance because she has basically put together a magnificent package about what's happening across the world."

Mr Ranford said the success of biofuel industries depended a lot on how countries valued renewable energy and Australia seemed to be at a disadvantage compared to other countries.

Ms Brown said Australia still had some distance to go in catching up with policies that were conducive to renewable energy advancements, a situation she felt was thwarting opportunities to increase rural wealth and improve environmental sustainability.

"Whereas Europe and America have introduced legislation favourable to private investment, and are benefiting from early research and development, the support in Australia for technology based on non-renewable resources leaves us standing alone," Ms Brown said.

Ms Brown said Europe aimed for biofuels to constitute one-quarter of the European Union's transportation fuels by 2030 and had introduced a directive demanding all transportation fuel include 5.75 per cent biofuel by the end of 2010.

In the United States, the Bush administration aims to replace 75 per cent of oil imports from the Middle East with renewables by 2025 and has set a mandate for 7.5 billion litres of biofuel by 2012, supported by federal tax incentives, she said.

Conversely, the Australian Government has set a non-mandatory target of 350 million litres of biofuel by 2010 (less than 0.01 per cent of transportation fuel).

"Australian policies do not foster the industry or set goals for future levels of biofuel consumption compared with many other developed nations, where policies are creating automatic biofuel markets through mandates and strict environmental emission standards," Ms Brown said.

While local companies have launched breeding programs to develop oilseed crops for biodiesel production Ms Brown said her research in Europe, North America, Japan and India found Australian farmers would get better long term security from 'second generation' technologies such as biomass to liquid (BTL) and cellulosic ethanol.

"This practice allows farmers to maximise grain harvest residue from food crops (such as wheat) providing value-adding opportunities and reducing land use competition," Ms Brown says.

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