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USDA Undersecretary Talks Renewable Energy at MSCC Gathering

Doug O'Brien, Acting Under Secretary for the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development, visited Mid-South Community College on Nov. 15 to learn about renewable energy/fuel efforts in the region.

O'Brien met with representatives of the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), alt.Consulting, MSCC, the Arkansas Advanced Energy Association (AAEA), and Tennessee and Arkansas USDA offices.



The DRA recently invested \$50,000 in a biodiesel micro-refinery in DeWitt, Ark., in partnership with alt.Consulting, AAEA, and MSCC. The group has expectations to develop more than forty such facilities across the Delta over the next two years.

The micro-refinery processes camelina plants and used vegetable oil to create biodiesel fuel.

“I’m very excited to learn what I’ve learned, and I congratulate everyone for the work that you have been doing on this,” O’Brien said after hearing presentations by

MSCC and alt.Consulting. “The work that you’re doing here is really the punch line that the Secretary (Tom) Vilsack uses in his presentations.”

“Rural America is terrifically relevant today. The answers to questions that not only the country but the world has in terms of the need for economic growth, and the need to meet growing demands of energy, food security, and environmental sustainability are found in rural places.”

O’Brien pointed out that growth potential abounds in rural areas despite the major challenges they face. He said a recent report by the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development shows that rural areas grow faster, on average, than urban regions.

“That surprises a lot of people,” O’Brien said. “The reason is there’s so much potential. It might be true that the baseline is relatively low, but there is huge potential if there are smart economic development strategies put in place in those rural places.”

He said the keys to rural growth are effective workforce development programs accompanied by infrastructure investment, two features readily apparent in the biodiesel collaboration in the Delta.

Reviving rural America “can’t be done with only federal resources,” O’Brien pointed out. “It needs to be done with smart collaboration; it needs to be done with a focus on strategic assets, and it needs to be done by leveraging all of the different partners to make certain that strategy comes together.”



“In particular, because of the statistics we see about poverty, it needs to be done with a very close eye on how it will treat those near the bottom of the economic platform. From what I’m seeing here, it’s ding ding, ding ding. I’m excited to see what’s happening in the Arkansas Delta, and I look forward to watching it succeed in the future.”

Chris Masingill, Delta Regional Authority Federal Co-Chairman, praised the USDA for its support of the efforts.

“We don’t have a stronger partner than USDA Rural Development,” Masingill said. “They are our No. 1 federal stakeholders. We share resources and projects, and we do a lot of things in concert with one another. This project has made it off the ground because of our partnership with the USDA.”



“Doug has been with us for a long time, and he is no stranger to these issues. This was an opportunity for Doug to get a sense of what’s happening in the region related to renewable energy.”

MSCC President Dr. Glen Fenter recognized the DRA and alt.Consulting executive director Ines Polonius for their work on the project.

“The relationship we have with the DRA under Chris’ leadership has been phenomenal,” Dr. Fenter said. “All of this can be tracked back in some way, shape, form, or fashion to the DRA. Every time we write a grant, we leverage the resources of the DRA. They continue to open doors and windows for us in our efforts to demonstrate that our past doesn’t have to define our future.”

“Ines and alt.Consulting have connected a bunch of the dots for us. They have put us in a position where unbelievable amounts of progress are already taking place. This is one of those deals where we worked four or five years to become an overnight success, and they accelerated that process.”

MSCC has been working with the University of Memphis, Montana State University-Northern, Arkansas State University, and Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas, and others to develop ways to make the venture succeed.

“How cool would it be if you could take one of the poorest regions in the country, begin to grow a crop, process that crop into something as powerful as biodiesel and jet fuel, and then have an insatiable appetite 20 minutes away in Memphis? That’s part of the economic development loop that we’re trying to create with all of it going back to changing the way we educate folks.”

The Farm to Fuel effort in DeWitt encompasses 22 organizations “that come together on a regular basis because this is not easy work,” Polonius said. “The DRA picked it up and just started opening doors. We’ve gotten so much support.”

“The most exciting thing about this whole process is the collaboration that made it work. This is about our fantastic partners at Mid-South Community College and the Arkansas Delta Training and Education Consortium. Through ADTEC, we’ve already identified young people who are trained to help us test this fuel to make sure it’s meets certification standards.”

Polonius said the economic impact of a micro-refinery in a particular area is \$900,000 to \$3 million, depending on the size of the unit.

“We’re creating three new businesses in every community. We start with four to six jobs with a project launch, and it just grows from there. We don’t want this to stop in DeWitt. We want to see this 25 to 30 times over in the Delta.”

Potential growth exists because 870,000 acres of farmland is available to grow camelina. The plant thrives in cooler temperatures and can be planted after other crops have been harvested (in October or November) and before new ones need to be planted (April).

Mollie Merry, director of Corporate Relations for the Arkansas Advanced Energy Association, said the group’s support for the project was a natural.

“When we found out about the Farm to Fuel project, we knew immediately that it was an ideal opportunity for us to harness the power and abundance of local resources and help create jobs and opportunities for community college students and others,” she said. “It’s the perfect project for us to support.”

For information about renewable/alternative energy and fuel training and entrepreneurial opportunities at Mid-South Community College, call (870) 733-6722.