

Arctic explorer makes tracks to Benson

Tom Cherveney West Central Tribune
Published Thursday, August 09, 2007

<http://www.wctrib.com/articles/index.cfm?id=23098§ion=homepage>

BENSON — Arctic explorer Will Steger has traversed the remotest regions of the world to open eyes to the reality of global warming.

He brought his expedition to Benson on Wednesday to open eyes to what can be done about it.

“This is what we can do in Minnesota,” said Steger, as he looked at how the Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company is building a gasifier that will eventually use farm-raised biomass in place of natural gas to power ethanol production at the Benson plant.



Arctic explorer Will Steger, arms folded, listens Wednesday as Bill Lee, general manager of the Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company, describes the construction of a gasifier at the Benson plant. Also pictured are, from left, Dan Benson and Gene Fynboh, members of the CVEC board of directors, and Rep. Bill Hilty, DFL-Finlayson. (Tribune photo by Tom Cherveney)

Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company is working in partnership with Frontline Bioenergy of Ames, Iowa, to construct the gasifier.

This is a pilot project, but the ethanol company wants to develop a gasifier system to eventually replace 90 percent of the natural gas now used at the 45 million-gallon-a-year ethanol plant.

The gasifier will initially use wood chips as its fuel. Eventually, Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company expects

to use a variety of biomass products gleaned from local farms. Corn stover, grasses, possibly even the distillers dried grains that are a byproduct of ethanol production could be used as fuel in the system, according to Bill Lee, Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company general manager.

The project is motivated by economics, especially the farmer-owned cooperative’s goal of providing value-added earnings to its members. The plant sends \$16 million a year to the owners of natural gas fields in Alberta, Canada, and Texas.

Lee said he’d rather keep the money in Swift County by purchasing biomass from local farmers. “Which is the better deal for the state of Minnesota?” he asked rhetorically.

The company calculates that biomass fuel can compete economically with natural gas as a fuel source at today’s prices, according to Lee. The economic benefits improve if natural gas prices rise.

No less important, Lee and Steger believe that biomass is the better deal for the environment, not to mention national security and the goal of self-sufficiency in energy production.

Lee said the use of biomass in place of natural gas will help reduce the carbon emissions involved in ethanol production. He offered figures showing an approximate one-third reduction in carbon by using biomass in place of natural gas.

Biomass-powered ethanol plants can also bring the industry closer to the day of cellulosic ethanol, or ethanol produced from grasses and other plants in place of corn, according to Lee. Before cellulosic ethanol can be a reality, a market for biomass needs to be created, he said.

Steger told his hosts that we may be moving faster than we realize to the “tipping point.” Global warming has already reduced the summer sea ice of the Arctic Ocean by one-third, he said. Its complete disappearance would trigger far more dramatic climate change, he warned.

There is still time, if we act quickly to reduce carbon emissions, he said.

He pointed to Minnesota’s ethanol industry as an example of how global warming can be slowed while economy improves.

Steger said he wants to see America harness its talents to address global warming in the same way that Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company continues to innovate and lead the way in ethanol production. “It’s a re-awakening of the American spirit around here,” he told his hosts.

The gasifier project is currently on schedule for a December startup, according to Lee.