

Ridgetown Alumnus

Excited to Be Operating Demonstration Biodiesel Plant



A very keen interest in renewable energy has led a recent Agriculture Diploma graduate back to Ridgetown Campus – this time as an employee.

Mark Uher, from Blenheim Ontario, graduated with a diploma in Agriculture in 2008. He was intrigued by the potential for alternative energy, so he enrolled in the Renewable Energy Technology certificate program at Selkirk College in Nelson, B.C.

Mark is now combining his love of agriculture and knowledge of renewable energy working at the on-campus farm-scale biodiesel demonstration plant – the first project of the Centre for Agricultural Renewable Energy and Sustainability (CARES) initiative.

The plant had its first test run in October, and as of January, 2010, it had produced 16,000 litres of biodiesel. The long-term goal is to produce 18,000 litres of fuel per week.

Mark says the main objective of the project is to show that it can be economically viable to make on-farm biodiesel. "The purpose isn't to corner the market on biodiesel in southwestern Ontario," he says. "We want to show farmers how to do it themselves."

Currently, they are using used restaurant oil to produce the fuel; research into using different oils – including palm and cocoa bean – is also planned. "One of the trickier aspects is getting a reliable, economical source of feedstock," Mark notes.

Mark jokes that they are not just on the cutting edge of technology with this biodiesel plant, they are on "the bleeding edge". "We suffer the initial challenges of planning and production to make it easier for farmers to do it themselves in the future," he says. Every part of the process, including the struggles and pitfalls, is being documented so farmers will know what to expect from beginning to end.

With a strong agricultural and energy background, Mark notes that this work is still a constant learning experience for him. The plant is also creating learning experience for students. The campus' Environmental Club and environmental classes have come to check-out the new equipment and students participating in an up-coming Careers in Green Energy event at Ridgetown hope to tour the plant.

Alumni or other groups interested in touring the demonstration facility should contact Dr. Rob Nicol, Ridgetown Researcher at 519-674-1641. ■



(above) Biodiesel is made in either of the two reactor tanks. The pipelines are colour-coded to clearly indicate what is in them.

(right) The boiler used to power the biodiesel process is fueled by biodiesel.



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