



## Renville Co. turning its attention to jobs, energy initiatives

Feb. 16--OLIVA-- Renville County hosts scores of visitors from every corner of the globe looking to take home ideas on how they can boost their agricultural production.

This overseas visitor came with an idea Renville Co-unity hopes to adopt, and in the process find new opportunities for its agricultural sector.

Clean energy can be all about economic development, according to Per Carlsson, representing the Scandinavian Cleantech Exports Association and general manager for ABioNova, of Gothenburgh, Sweden.

Carlsson told an audience this week in Olivia that the development of renewable energy sources in Sweden has brought about a 48 percent increase in the country's gross domestic product, while benefiting both the environment and energy security. The country has reduced carbon dioxide emissions by 80 percent and relies on its own forests for more of its energy needs, rather than imported fossil fuels.

He said money spent on fossil fuel returns only 3 to 5 percent to a local economy. In contrast, 80 to 85 percent of the money spent on biomass remains at home.

"For me it's kind of a no brainer," said Carlsson. "Why shouldn't you do it?"

The association he represents includes manufacturers of products that use biomass fuel, in most cases for heating. Most of the companies are small or medium-sized. They are looking to expand their operations into the U.S., where they see growing opportunities for biomass, according to Carlsson.

The company he heads builds a biomass boiler that can use pellets or wood chips for heating. He installed one of the units in September at the Prairie Woods Environmental Learning Center in rural Spicer, where it is getting its first U.S. test drive.

The Prairie Woods unit can use a variety of biomass fuels, including pellets produced from agricultural residues. Sunrise Agra Fuels of Bird Island produces the pellets from agricultural byproducts, such as sunflower hulls and soybean stubble.

In Sweden, district heating systems are the norm for large and small cities. Carlsson said his company's boilers provide the thermal energy needed for everything from separate apartment buildings to entire municipalities.

He doesn't expect the United States to add the many miles of underground piping for district heating that already exists in Sweden. But he does see opportunities for his biomass boilers to plug into existing hot water heating systems in everything from school buildings to hospitals. Smaller versions of the units also work well for single homes.

Bob Ryan, Sunrise Agra Fuels, said there may also be opportunities in this region for biomass heating in the many smaller communities that do not have natural gas networks. Thermal energy from biomass sources can be price competitive with today's price for natural gas, he said.

Carlsson said he reached an agreement with a Superior, Wis., firm to manufacture the company's boilers. He sees Minnesota with its forest and agricultural biomass resources as a promising market.

Renville County is certainly eager to see new markets developed for agricultural biomass, according to Chris Hettig, economic development director for the county. She said her office has also been working with manufacturers in the county in hopes of finding new opportunities in the growing renewable energy sector.

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