

Researcher makes case for wood fuels, chemicals

BY KEVIN MILLER
OF THE NEWS STAFF

ORONO — A University of Maine researcher said Thursday that Maine's pulp mills can help feed growing world demand for biofuels and biochemicals while continuing to produce traditional forest products.

But to make the change, mills will need new technology and hefty investments.

Adriaan van Heiningen, a professor in UMaine's Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering, told several dozen students, faculty and members of the public that exploring how to get more out of their forest resources makes good economic and environmental sense to mills in Maine and elsewhere.

And he and other UMaine researchers hope to prove it at the nearby Red Shield Environmental mill in Old Town.

Van Heiningen, who was speaking as part of a summer lecture series, said new technologies will allow mills to produce not only ethanol but also acetic acid, diesel fuel, butanol and a host of other industrial chemicals used in fuels, plastics and countless products.

Best of all, these biofuels and biochemicals can be produced from waste streams or during the pulping process, he said.

By diversifying, Maine mills will be better positioned to compete with low-cost overseas operations. These bio-based products also help reduce U.S. dependence on fossil fuels through the use of a home-grown, renewable resource that

is "carbon neutral," van Heiningen said.

"The traditional forest products industry needs more revenue from producing higher-value products in addition to wood products," he said.

Van Heiningen is among the researchers working to demonstrate these technologies just down the road from the university in Old Town.

A team of UMaine researchers is working with Red Shield Environmental on a pilot project to begin producing ethanol and other biochemicals at the former Georgia-Pacific mill.

The mill began producing and selling pulp last month and hopes to start producing ethanol and other biochemicals in the coming months. UMaine has received more than \$10 million in research grants for the project, and Red Shield officials have said they plan to invest up to \$100 million in the facility.

Van Heiningen acknowledged that the costs of retrofitting old mills with new, biomass conversion technology will not be cheap. But he said he believes costs will come down as the technology is proven and as larger mills achieve economy of scale.

As for Red Shield, van Heiningen said the researchers are trying to implement ideas that benefit both the economy and the environment.

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