

First season of flax begins in Williamsburg County

By: Matt McColl, South Carolina. Published November 09, 2011



Naturally Advanced Technologies, a company based in Vancouver, is partnering with Williamsburg County farmers in the harvesting of flax, which will then be used in the production of clothing.

KINGSTREE, SC --

While fields in other counties will be getting a rest during the winter months, farmers in Williamsburg County will be busy filling theirs with a four-letter word that means more green: flax.

After a summer that was especially tough on local crops, Naturally Advanced Technology (NAT), a Vancouver based biomass manufacturer, brought the opportunity to partner with local farmers to grow flax, a multi-purpose plant that can be used in the manufacturing of clothing.

Hilton McGill, executive director of the Williamsburg County Economic Development Board, said the agricultural makeup lends itself to the sort of year-round farming that is capable with flax.

“It’s always been a priority in Williamsburg County that we go after any sort of processing company that would be able to take advantage of farming opportunities in the county,” McGill said. “This does provide an opportunity for a winter crop ... and right now, a very profitable crop.”

With cotton prices on the rise, companies such as HanesBrands Inc. and Levi Strauss & Co. are experimenting with organic flax in a measure to try to contain the costs related to manufacturing clothing.

Although Williamsburg County is only in the early stages of the burgeoning project, it remains one of the few areas in the state in which flax is grown in large quantities.

While it’s not yet the cash crop many hope for it to become, flax has proven to be significantly more valuable for farmers to grow than its main competitor, wheat.

“If a farmer can grow a crop, it’s a substantial profit,” McGill said. “At one point, they looked at it like it would be as good as wheat, but now, they’ve sweetened the pot a great deal and it’s more attractive to plant the flax than it is to plant the wheat.”

So far, the only hindrance in the crop’s expansion throughout Williamsburg County has been the level of unfamiliarity farmers have with it. Flax is not often associated with warm weather climates like that of South Carolina, but it is completely at home and capable of high yields during the cooler winter months.

Even though farmers are not yet jumping at the opportunity to grow the crop, McGill believes NAT’s faith in the area is justified.

“It could be a great winter crop for the farmers of Williamsburg County, but the problem is that because it’s new, a lot of people are hesitant to get into that business,” he said. “I can assure that the company is in the process of investing \$18 million in Williamsburg County and they don’t intend to go anywhere, but they will not be successful unless they can get local farmers to grow flax.”

With the county in need of an economic boost to knock it from its perpetual doldrums, Williamsburg County Supervisor Stanley Pasley said he is ready to see what the crop can yield for the county.

Pasley said he believes flax provides another opportunity to continue work throughout the winter, rather than stopping after the summer months.

“It creates some economic opportunities for the farms and also, hopefully creates some jobs,” he said. “We are hoping that the farmers will take advantage of it.”

<http://www2.scnow.com/news/pee-dee/2011/nov/09/first-season-flax-begins-williamsburg-county-ar-2679368/>