

## **S.C. farmers getting the flax**

By Chuck Crumbo - Sept. 14, 2011

KINGSTREE -- CRAiLAR processed flax fiber, which was developed by Naturally Advanced Technologies Inc. of Canada, is regarded as key to building greener supply chain for textile industry. The company is locating a processing plant in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina and will use flax grown within 100 miles.

A rebirth of South Carolina's textile industry could be on the horizon thanks to a Canadian company and its research into processing flax fiber so it can be used just like cotton.



Vancouver, British Columbia-based [Naturally Advanced Technologies Inc.'s](#) foray into developing flax fiber is part of an effort to unlock the "potential of renewable and environmentally sustainable biomass resources from bast fibers," according to the company's website.

South Carolina, where the textile industry once was king of manufacturing, will be at the forefront.

At a site in Kingstree in Williamsburg County, the company has been testing the process, called CRAiLAR Fibers, since August 2010. It plans to convert the facility to a permanent production plant and distribution center. Operations are set to begin in the second quarter of 2012.

To have flax to process, NAT has an agreement with Carolina Eastern Precision Ag of Pamplico to recruit growers. NAT plans to contract more than 15,000 acres of flax — grown as a winter crop — in its first year.

Flax fibers have been used for centuries to make things such as linen, rope and tea bags.

The breakthrough with CRAiLAR processed flax fiber is that it has the same warmth and feel of cotton, but is stronger, the company said. The CRAiLAR fiber also offers better wicking qualities and absorbs dye better, so fewer chemicals are needed.

CRAiLAR flax fiber can be used on the same machinery used to make cotton fabric, and can be processed into yarn for hosiery, denim, knitwear and home furnishings. As well, cotton prices are climbing and it costs less to grow and produce flax.

Using a blend of flax and cotton is regarded as key to building a greener supply chain for the textile industry because flax doesn't require irrigation or chemical fertilizers and pesticides to grow.



CEO Ken Barker

South Carolina — mainly the Pee Dee region — fits NAT's business model because the climate and soil types are well-suited for growing flax.

It's also a winter crop that could contribute to a steady, year-round source of income for farmers.

NAT has already acquired a site in Kingstree where it plans to begin producing 300,000 pounds of CRAiLAR flax fiber per week sometime during the second quarter of 2012, said CEO Ken Barker.

The flax will be grown within a 100-mile radius of Kingstree. Barker said locating a processing plant in Kingstree, which will initially employ 20 to 40 people, will keep transportation costs down.

The company has been working on the process with Canada's [National Research Council](#) and the [Alberta Innovates](#).

NAT was founded in 1998 as a provider of environmentally friendly, socially responsible clothing. The company has been working on the CRAiLAR fiber project, which represents a \$15 million investment, for more than four years and already has lined up customers such as [HanesBrands Inc.](#) It also has a commercialization agreement with [Georgia-Pacific Consumer Products](#), Barker said.

South Carolina offered "significant upsides" to growing the quality of flax needed, said Jonn Foulk, a research scientist with the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#).

"The climate is ideal, the fertilization and weed control are minimal and the winter rainfall provides adequate irrigation," Foulk said. "Additionally, production in the Southeastern U.S. has the potential to enhance rural economic growth and to supply a natural domestic source of fiber to industries."