



## Local farmers get the facts on flax in Kingstree

Matt McColl – August 3, 2011



Naturally Advanced Technology Chief Operating Office Jason Finnis speaks during the company's meeting with local farmers to discuss the possibility of growing flax in Williamsburg County on Wednesday, Aug. 3 at Brown's Barbecue in Kingstree.

More than half way through a summer that has been very tough on local crops like corn, many farmers may be looking for an alternative and Wednesday in Kingstree, they may have found it.

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.

The company has stated that they will be looking for enough farmers to participate as to procure approximately 15,000 acres of farmland within a 100 mile radius of Kingstree for the growing of the resilient crop.

Hilton McGill, executive director of the Williamsburg County Economic Development Board said that he believes that with the initial investment NAT may possibly make in the area, the dire economic situation for the county could improve.

“I think it’s a tremendous win-win,” McGill said. “This flax product is something that a lot of people have noticed and are getting some good use of. Especially with the price of cotton going through the roof, this is an alternative to cotton as well.”

While the long term economic impact of flax growing in Williamsburg County is yet to be determined, many think that through flax, local farmers will have a more sustained and reliable income from year to year.

South Carolina Department of Agriculture Commissioner Hugh Weathers said that with an alternative crop that Williamsburg County farmers would be able to grow during the winter, problems such as a summer drought could be mitigated.

“It brings a new crop alternative to South Carolina farmers... and being a winter crop, it adds to the market for some of those acres (allowing year round farming),” Weathers said.

Specifically looking at the summer of 2011, with crop and especially corn yields down Weathers, along with NAT believe that flax will be a viable alternative for farmers to turn to during the winter months, to help offset some of the losses sustained during droughts and heat waves.

“This year was not a good year and we’re not going to make our average yields,” Weathers said. “But an option like flax give a farmer an opportunity in a 12 month period of time, to still either...minimize his losses to some extent by (gaining) another revenue in the winter.”

For farmers, growing the flax will not be much different from other crops, other than it is grown during the winter months.

NAT Chief Financial Officer Guy Prevost said that the flax harvested by local farmers will then be sold to companies that Naturally Advanced Technologies has previously agreed to supply with flax, such as Hanes, Cintas and Levi Strauss.

“It’ll just be another crop that farmers down in South Carolina will be able to grow,” Prevost said. “If a farmer has a couple of fields that might be a little bit damp in the winter, they might be perfect for our flax.”

The flax itself is unique in that it has been used for more than 20,000 years in production of fabrics as a linen, but with the help of scientific advances, the flax produced by Naturally Advanced Technologies has a look and feel that is similar to traditional cotton.

“It’s a completely natural fiber,” Prevost said. “It’s very similar to cotton...The way that it wicks water, dye uptake and strength have all shown to be positive.”

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