

Flax manufacturer partners with Williamsburg County farmers



By: Matt McColl – July 26, 2011

KINGSTREE SC - While mushrooms grow in Hemingway and water buffalo make their home east of Kingstree, another biological innovator will soon be calling Williamsburg County home.

Naturally Advanced Technologies, a Vancouver-based biomass manufacturer, will soon be procuring about 15,000 acres of farmland within a 100 mile radius of Kingstree to grow flax, a multi-purpose plant that can be used in the manufacturing of clothing.

The company has contracted with Carolina Eastern Precision Ag of Pamplico to assist in the effort to recruit growers and contractors, as well as to provide advice on cultivation related to the production of flax.

Although Naturally Advanced Technologies Chief Financial Officer Guy Prevost said he expects the operation in Kingstree to employ 25 to 30 people by the middle of 2012, he believes the majority of the economic and employment impact will be after the company establishes itself along with the crop in the region.

“We will be running a facility down there and it’ll be operating 24 hours a day, six days a week,” Prevost said. “That will only get larger as we scale up and increase production, though.”

After the crops of Williamsburg County sustained a tough summer, with corn damaged by the season’s drought, the flax grown by local farmers will be able to sustain itself through the winter and provide another option for agriculture in the area.

From the field, the flax harvested by local farmers will be sold to companies that Naturally Advanced Technologies has previously agreed to supply, 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.”

This removes the imperative from the farmer to find a buyer for the product, should the market falter, according to the company.

While the relationships being established by Naturally Advanced Technologies and Williamsburg County farmers are unique, Prevost said, they are nothing compared with the inimitable properties of the company’s flax.

Flax has been used for more than 20,000 years in production of fabrics such as 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, Prevost said.

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

While the product being produced by Naturally Advanced Technologies is something Prevost and the rest of the company are proud of, he said he believes the company’s focus on sustainable production is where the company can provide a bit of stewardship for the communities it serves, such as Williamsburg County.

“Our process is completely benign,” Prevost said. “We don’t use harsh chemicals or anything like that. If flax is grown down in South Carolina or in the parries of Canada, it doesn’t require irrigation.”