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Photosynthesis + algae = fuel

Solix Biofuels harnesses the power of pond scum to create oil on reservation

by Jason Gonzales

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A company with a facility in Coyote Gulch on Southern Ute Indian tribal land is working to harness the properties of pond scum into the next big thing in biofuels.

We are using the oil that algae create for diagnostic purposes right now. Our commercial partners are testing it to see how suitable it is in different (fuel) conversions.

- Douglas Henston, chief executive officer, Solix Biofuels Inc.

"We are growing algae and producing oil," Solix Biofuels Inc.'s Chief Executive Officer Douglas Henston said in a telephone interview. "However, we are not yet producing a usable product, because the algae have to be at a certain density."

Henston said the algae needs a suitable amount of time to grow, and only one of the three tanks at the Solix site has algae at the moment.

"It's just a function of time," he said. "We are looking to have all three tanks saturated (with algae) at the end of August or the end of September."

The algae then will begin producing oil through the process of photosynthesis. The Coyote Gulch facility, Henston said, is perfect for that process because of the amount of sun the region receives.

Once the company is able to harvest a suitable amount of oil, Solix then will ship it to oil companies to be tested for commercial use.

"We are using the oil that the algae create for diagnostic purposes right now," Henston said. "Our commercial partners are testing it to see how suitable it is in different (fuel) conversions."

It's only a matter of time before it is ready for commercial use, Henston said, and when that happens, Solix will be creating the "second generation" of biofuels.

First-generation biofuels, such as ethanol and biodiesel, have higher prices and are volatile. The problem with ethanol, especially, is that it takes land and water that previously went to food production. The algae facility uses only the sun, water and carbon dioxide.

Henston said Solix estimates the facility can produce 2,000 to 2,500 gallons per acre per year. The company said it wants to employ a total of 20 workers at the facility.

Henston said he doesn't know when the integration of algae-created oil will hit the market, but he hopes it will be soon.

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"We hope that the transition of the platform to a large-scale, commercial production is right around the corner," he said.

The Southern Ute Indian Tribe could not be reached for comment.

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