PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

By Jim Massey
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BELMONT — A 20,000-head beef feedlot with an ethanol plant, greenhouse and anaerobic digesters has been proposed in Lafayette County.

The $120-million project was unveiled to about 400 people at a Dec. 6 public meeting in Belmont, near the proposed feedlot site.

Belmont BioAg investors and advisers outlined their plans and fielded questions during a two-hour meeting designed to address many of the concerns that have been raised since local residents began hearing bits and pieces about the project.

Belmont BioAg investors and advisers said their project would include the beef finishing lot, an ethanol plant capable of annually producing 50 million gallons of ethanol, an 11-acre greenhouse, 10 anaerobic manure digesters, a heat and electrical generation system, a solids separator and water treatment system and a food-grade carbon dioxide production facility.

Bob Brodbeck, Platteville, a former owner of the Dick's Supermarket chain, is Belmont BioAg's president. He said a group of southwest Wisconsin investors have pledged money for the project, but he declined to name them.

Project organizers, who say the facility would be the first of its kind, have an option to purchase a 280-acre farm about two miles south of Belmont. About 160 acres of the farm would be developed, Mr. Brodbeck said.

The project originally was proposed as a large feedlot, but was expanded to include more components as the number of investors grew.

Mr. Brodbeck estimated Belmont BioAg would create 67 to 72 full-time jobs with $40,000 average salaries. Another 100 seasonal workers would be needed to work in the greenhouse, he said.

The ethanol plant could add about 6½ cents per bushel to the local corn price, Mr. Brodbeck said.

Tim Baye, the project's chief executive officer, said other sites were considered in Grant and Lafayette counties, but the Belmont site is the "declared site and the one we're going to proceed with."

Mr. Baye began assisting the group in 2002 while working as the Southwest Wisconsin Business Management Program director. He took a leave of absence from his UW-Extension position to work full time on the project.

Mr. Brodbeck said project organizers have a "daunting road ahead of us" before the first shovel of dirt is turned.

Permitting process

The project will undergo considerable scrutiny from the Wisconsin Department of Natural

Resources, according to Russ Anderson, a DNR environmental analysis supervisor. When project organizers submit a plan to the DNR, an environmental assessment will be done to determine whether to issue the necessary permits, he said.

“This is a very large project with a lot of potential impacts to your community and the environment,” Mr. Anderson said. “We will address the application as quickly as we can while giving it a thorough review.”

Mr. Brodbeck said if permits are approved on schedule, construction could begin in late 2006 and the facility could be operational during the second quarter of 2008. Belmont BioAg’s DNR permit application is expected to be reviewed by a local citizen’s advisory committee is expected to review Belmont BioAg’s DNR permit application later this month before the permit is submitted to the DNR early next year.

The project is proposed in a township where there is no zoning, so local officials have no jurisdiction over the proposal.

Mr. Anderson said DNR officials take an impartial view of projects and issue permits based on the projects’ merit.

“It wouldn’t be fair to speculate on what the outcome will be until we see something in writing,” Mr. Anderson said. “But if they can meet the conditions of the permit, they get the permit. It doesn’t matter if we like it or not.”

Beef feedlot

Mr. Baye said the large feedlot idea came from Green Bay packing plants that were looking for more Wisconsin-finished beef. Mr. Brodbeck said most of the beef calves born in Wisconsin go out of state to large custom feedlots and are brought back to Wisconsin packing plants.

“If we could retain some of those animals here we could rejuvenate the cattle industry in this part of the state,” Mr. Brodbeck said.

Mr. Baye said Belmont BioAg probably would buy most of its first batch of cattle from other states, but when possible would like to buy replacement animals from local farmers.

Mr. Brodbeck said the cattle-finishing operation would include eight barns that would each hold 2,500 head. The barns would be built to give animals 33 percent more space than conventional confinement facilities.

The barns would include a water-based manure removal system to minimize odor and keep animals healthier. Manure would fall through slatted floors and flow into manure digesters.

Manure digesters

The facility would include eight to 10 manure digesters that each would hold 1 million gallons. The digesters would use Danish technology to generate an organic matter breakdown, increasing biogas production. The biogas produced by the digesters would fuel the facility’s power and heat operation.

Mr. Brodbeck said the digesters would generate eight megawatts of continuous power, with no

emissions and very little noise.

Greenhouse

An 11.2-acre greenhouse would be designed to turn waste heat into annual bedding plants and flowers destined for large retailers in the Madison and Milwaukee areas.

Ethanol plant

The ethanol plant would have significantly lower environmental effects and improved energy conversion compared with typical ethanol plants, Mr. Brodbeck said. Using on-site-generated biofuel as the farm's primary energy source would reduce fossil fuel use, he said.

The plant could annually produce 50 million gallons of ethanol and use about 18 million bushels of corn.

Most of the air emissions from a typical ethanol plant come from the process that dries the used grain, Mr. Brodbeck said. The proposed project's grain would be used as cattle feed and as fuel in the combustion system rather than being dried and sold.

Water and energy

A two-stage water treatment system would convert manure digester liquid to potable water, which would be used for cleaning the facilities.

Developers say the combustion system would provide nearly all the thermal energy required to operate the ethanol plant. Fuel for the combustion system would primarily be biomass harvested from area farms and facility byproducts, such as distiller's grain, digester solids, greenhouse wastes, livestock wastes not transferred to the digesters.

Plans call for enough power to be generated by manure digesters to meet all the facility's electrical needs.

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