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(Ken Martin / C-T)

Walt Dickinson, president and chief marketing officer of Integro Earth Fuels, spoke to those in attendance at the Farm-City Week Breakfast Wednesday morning in the Person County Office Building auditorium. The annual breakfast was sponsored by several local Person County farmers and the Golden Corral restaurant.

Farm-City breakfast attendees learn more about 'green coal' facility slated for Person County - 11/22/08

By VICKI BERRY
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The audience at the annual Farm-City Week Breakfast, held Wednesday in the Person County Office Building auditorium, learned about the nation's first-ever commercial production facility for "green coal."

Walt Dickinson of Integro Biofuels was

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the guest speaker at the breakfast, sponsored by local farmers Earl Brooks, Carver Brothers Turf, Rick and Bob Carver, Donnie Clayton, Mickey Clayton, Atwill Day, John and Jay Foushee, Donald Hester, Russell Horton, Jack Pleasant, Piedmont Burley, Thomas Family Farm and Coleman and Brian Whitfield. Dickinson's topic was how energy crops will affect the agricultural future of Person County and how Integro will be looking to partner with local growers.

"I am really excited about coming to Person County," Dickinson said. Integro Earth Fuels, an Asheville-based firm, announced earlier this fall that it plans to build a facility on a tract near the Georgia Pacific Corp.

Construction is expected to begin in April. Dickinson reiterated Wednesday that the company's hopes are to have the plant in production by the third quarter of 2009 and initially employ approximately 20 workers. From that point, growth would be completed in phases employing as many as 40 workers.

The facility will operate 24 hours, seven days a week, 50 weeks a year, said Dickinson. The 44-acre site will initially produce 10 tons of torrefied biomass per hour resulting in 84,000 tons annually.

Integro Earth Fuels will be "putting in a facility that looks at sustainable resources," Dickinson said, adding that the facility will also offer opportunities for forestry and agricultural endeavors.

Torrefied biomass, dubbed "green coal," described as an economical carbon neutral feedstock, is a product derived from sustainable resources, such as pulpwood and forest wastes, designed to help utilities run their coal-fired power plants cleaner and with nearly as much power efficiency as from coal alone. At the same time, torrefied biomass addresses concerns about global climate change and interests in renewable energy.

"Coal fired utilities have to meet carbon standards," explained Dickinson.

He further noted that this new plant will be the first of possibly 20 to 25 facilities. "A lot has to do with what's available," he said.

Fifty percent of the electricity in the country results from coal-fired facilities, said Dickinson, and the demand for energy is expected to double between now and 2030.

This increase, combined with the mandate in North Carolina that requires a certain percentage of a utility's overall energy sales be derived from renewable resources, along with energy-efficiency measures, requires change.

Yet, the use of coal remains the best option for cheap energy. The goal is to "come up with a way to keep electricity inexpensive," Dickinson said. "Clean coal is an exciting opportunity, but challenging."

Torrefied biomass uses the chemistry of torrefaction in working with wood. Drying wood and burning off the hemicellulose frees

the wood to be more grindable and allows the product to be combined and used jointly with coal, Dickinson explained.

The benefit of biomass is that “green coal” can reduce carbon dioxide and be handled like coal, yet meet the standards set by the state.

According to Dickinson, it takes two tons of biomass to create one ton of torrefied wood. He added they will work only with sustainable forests. If a process does not call for replacing the forest then the issue is being hurt, not helped. He said the company is currently working with the state on a “very fast growing tree.”

By 2015 the company hopes to use one-half pulp combined with energy crops and construction wastes.

“Torrefied wood is a great solution to the energy problem,” Dickinson said.

Farm City Week concluded on Friday with the annual Farm City Pig Pickin’ held at Hyco Warehouse with entertainment provided by the Sonny Duncan Band, along with educational displays.

Since 1955, the National Farm-City Council, together with state and local councils and committees, has encouraged building an understanding of the interdependence between rural and urban residents. With an ongoing theme of “Partners in Progress” Farm City Week spotlights how American agriculture reaches far beyond the farm or ranch. Agriculture is an industry that includes a significant number of urban and suburban residents who help process, transport, sell and distribute the bounty.

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