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Green Circle opens doors to public in Jackson County



Mark Skinner/Floridan

A tent shelters visitors touring the Green Circle Bio Energy plant following the grand opening ceremony Tuesday.

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Green Circle Bio Energy opened its doors to the public Tuesday for tours of the facility after a ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the opening of the plant.

Green Circle buys trees from owners all across this region of the state and reduces them to wood pellets which will be used by European markets as alternative sources of energy.

State agencies, staff from the office of Gov. Charlie Crist, local dignitaries and members of the public at large were represented at the well-attended event.

They had a chance to meet Green Circle VIPs and representatives of the Swedish company that built the majority of the plant.

After the ceremony, buses took loads of passengers out for a look at the operation.

Along the way, they passed row upon row of harvested trees that will eventually be stripped of bark to begin the transformation process.

Even the bark will be used as fuel in the drying process for the pellets that are produced from the naked trunk, the Green Circle tour guide pointed out as the tour bus rounded a corner. "Nothing is wasted," she said.

Mountains of wood chips being made ready for processing could be seen across the landscape as visitors kept riding toward the plant.

Disembarking to walk the last few feet to the door, they passed by the rail spur that will bring the finished product to Panama City for shipping to European markets.

Once inside, visitors saw an array of machines that will turn the wood chips into energy pellets.

In one room, plant managers showed some component parts of the machinery, including the 70-pound blades used to chip the trees.

Green Circle is the largest wood pellet plant in the world, and was built at a cost of more than \$100 million. Although the bulk of that investment came from the company, the federal, state and Jackson County governments chipped in a combined total of more than \$12 million in the way of tax incentives, road-building funds and other assistance.

The scope of the public-private partnership, and the international co-operative effort it took to make the project a reality has made it a model for the world to follow, many insiders said Tuesday.

In becoming home to Green Circle, they say, Jackson County has positioned itself as a major player in the world-wide effort to find solutions to universal problems like global warming, skyrocketing fuel prices and depletion of natural resources which continue to plague the planet.