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Fuel to feed: Biodiesel production leftovers become bargain food for cattle

By TOM LUTEY of the Billings Gazette



Steve Charter mixes oil seed, hay and beet tops to feed cattle on his ranch north of Billings last week.

LARRY MAYER/Billings Gazette

BILLINGS - A lot of adjectives are used to market biodiesel - lean, green and homegrown, to name a few - but scientists this week offered up another: yummy.

Biodiesel production in the United States has surged this decade, from barely measurable amounts in 1999 to more than 250 million gallons in 2007. On the back end of that jump in production are millions of tons of pressed oil seed, which turns out to be pretty good cow food.

"Our cows like it better," said Jeanne Charter, who ranches 19 miles north of Billings.

Earlier this week, as Charter's husband, Steve, made the rounds with the feed truck, the couple's Angus and Charolais cattle turned their noses up at the first helping. The offering didn't have the crushed safflower meal to which the cows are accustomed. But the second pass had 5 pounds of meal mixed in and suddenly everyone crowded the truck.

Ranchers are beginning to crowd the oil seed meal market, but their interest is more about empty wallets than empty stomachs. With corn feed selling for \$225 a ton, a product like safflower meal selling for \$90 to \$120 is a relative bargain. The Charters bought 78 tons of the meal this year and would have bought more had their supplier, Montola oil of Culbertson, not run out.

There's seed meal on hand now at the Montola plant, said president Paul Miller, but for the first time it's all spoken for. He attributes the rush on oil seed meal to the rising cost of corn feed, which has more ranchers logging on to montola.com to see what the 3-year-old company has for sale.

"We produce it by the ton and sell it by the ton in mostly truck quantities, which is 40,000 to 50,000 pounds," Miller said. "The big thing is freight with diesel costing almost \$4 a gallon."

The Charters bought a seed press from a company in India so they can produce their own meal.

The meal isn't just a cheap substitute for corn, it's actually better for the cows Americans eat, said Greg Lardy, animal science professor at North Dakota State University. Lardy issued a report Tuesday outlining the merits of feeding meal to livestock. He said there's a real opportunity for meal to make a difference for cattle wintering on natural grass in Western states. Those cattle desperately need a supplement of protein to see them through. Oil seed meal is a good candidate, he said.

With their \$5,000 press, the Charters started making their own meal this winter. They turned to two local gear heads and biodiesel users for help.

One of the helpers, Craig Hall, of Billings, powers his 2004 Dodge pickup exclusively with vegetable oil recycled from restaurants. Hall swears by recycled oil, which he's able to run in his Dodge diesel with no

alterations to the engine. He has had to add a heated fuel tank and a pump to keep deliver the vegetable oil and keep it from gelling up on cold days.

Although he hasn't tried it yet, Hall is certain safflower oil from the Charters' press would run in his vehicle just fine. Vegetable oils usually do, although some require a little thinning with gasoline, he said. The only thing holding him back from running nonrecycled oil is the cost.

"The used stuff is usually free," Hall said. "If you were to buy it new, Costco has it for 78 cents a pound, or about \$5.58 a gallon."

Biodiesel advocates say making the waste of the alternative fuel profitable is crucial to getting the fuel's overall price lowered. If the only profit turned on the crop is from fuel, then biodiesel's Feed odds at success aren't good.