

# Projects energize alternative fuels

By [John Bartlett](#)

[john.bartlett@timesnews.com](mailto:john.bartlett@timesnews.com)

MEADVILLE - Northwest Pennsylvania could become a player in breaking the nation's dependence on foreign oil and addressing environmental issues.

Plans for an ethanol plant in Crawford County and biodiesel plants in Erie and near Oil City in Venango County set the stage.

The most recent studies show that corn-based ethanol and soybean-based biodiesel provide net energy gains and result in fewer greenhouse gases that cause global warming and emit fewer other pollutants when burned.

And for every gallon of ethanol or biodiesel used to power a vehicle, that much less foreign oil is imported, said Ed Stahl of BBI International, the firm doing the feasibility study for the ethanol plant.

Allegheny College economics professor Stephen Onyeiwu said the emergence of alternative-fuel industries in the region also offers hope for economic linkages that further benefit local communities.

The environmental benefits of ethanol and biodiesel were not always clear, said Kathy Greely, director of the Commonwealth Community Energy Project based at Allegheny College.

One of the biggest concerns was that the energy it took to grow corn and process it into ethanol or raise soybeans and process them in biodiesel used more energy than the resulting ethanol or biodiesel produced, she said.

A study conducted by University of California-Berkeley researchers and published in the January issue of the journal *Science* answered those questions, at least as far as ethanol is concerned, Greely said.

"Before that article came out, there was a lot of debate in the scientific community whether ethanol had a positive energy balance," she said.

The researchers determined there was as much as a 20 percent net gain in energy for ethanol.

Brad Davis, president of Lake Erie Biofuels, the company planning the biodiesel plant at the former International Paper plant site in Erie, said other recent studies show the same net energy gains for biodiesel.

"The literature now clearly shows it is on the positive side when it comes to energy gains," he said.

Still, there remain doubters to the energy gains of ethanol and biodiesel. Most notable is Cornell University researcher David Pimentel, who continues to argue that the studies showing net energy gains are wrong. He also questions the other

environmental benefits of burning ethanol and biodiesel when total production — including farming — is factored in.

However, the ethanol and biodiesel industries cite numerous studies — including the Berkeley study and several by the U.S. Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency, that show reductions in greenhouse gases that cause global warming, and most other air pollutants, from the alternative fuels.

In fact, the primary use today of ethanol in the United States is to make gasoline cleaner burning and to meet summertime emission restrictions.

The Lake Erie Biodiesel plant is likely to be the first alternative-fuels plant up and running in the region.

Davis said the company is currently going through the permitting process for the 45-million-gallon-a-year facility and expects to begin construction this summer.

A feasibility study for the ethanol plant proposal developed by the Crawford County Farm Bureau just got under way.

The Venango County biodiesel plant is planned for the former Pennzoil Co. refinery site just north of Oil City. Walter Frint, executive director of the Allegheny-Clarion Valley Development Corp., the agency that is shepherding the project, said an announcement regarding the plan would be made Tuesday.

Allegheny College's Onyeiwu said the plants would bring some immediate economic benefits, most notably jobs and the money that will be pumped into the communities.

However, there are also potential longer-term benefits, including the fact alternative fuels are likely to be a growing industry. Another real possibility is that other businesses will locate in the region to serve or benefit from the biofuel plants.

"I think this is a very great opportunity for the area," he said.

Last changed: Apr 16, 2006

This content provided by GoErie.com/Erie Times-News is copyrighted material and all rights are reserved. You may not reproduce this or distribute it electronically, in print or otherwise without [written permission](#).