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Chicken waste will help fuel new Allen plant

By Deborah Gates
Daily Times Staff Writer

VIENNA -- Allen Hatchery Inc. has announced plans to use chicken manure to generate steam at a facility in Linkwood, creating an alternative use for bird litter that officials at the Seaford-based poultry company say is pioneering and environmentally friendly.

Construction of a plant to produce waste-to-steam energy should begin within weeks at Allen's JCR Enterprises rendering plant in Dorchester County, said Mike Pilcher, vice president of operations at Allen Family Foods Inc.

Chicken litter used as a primary fuel source would reduce farm waste and subsequently reduce manure runoff into tributaries and the Chesapeake Bay, Pilcher said.

"The industry can continue to grow (poultry) on the Eastern Shore, and we're finding an alternative for manure," he said Wednesday. "It is an alternative use of litter."

The litter replaces fossil fuel in the steam production process.

The plant, being built by rem Engineering of Roswell, Ga., is expected to be operational by September 2006, and represent the first known in the United States to burn chicken litter as fuel.

"(Allen) will be the first," Bob Mooney, president at rem Engineering, said Wednesday. "We're first to do it commercially. We've tested it, and this is the first commercial-scale (plant) built that I know of."

The plant comes after years of debate and some criticism over drawing energy from chicken litter, which is a mixture of manure and wood chips that on average has about a 30-percent moisture content.

For several years, state agriculture and environmental officials have explored ways to reduce the tonnage of farm waste on the rural Eastern Shore, a major poultry region that last year produced more than 500 million birds.

A proposal by an England-based company to build an Eastern Shore electric power plant fueled by chicken litter for Allen Foods was challenged in 2001 by Dorchester residents over safety concerns.

Pilcher said at full capacity, 12,000 tons of poultry litter annually would produce about 15 percent of the steam at JCR, enough to operate about one-seventh of the plant.

"The (operation) is not enough to run the whole plant; this is an element of experimentation to make sure it is going to work," Pilcher said.

The 10,000-pound-per-hour steam plant has won approval by Maryland environmental and agricultural officials.

In a statement, Agriculture Secretary Lewis Riley called the manure project "a new alternative use for poultry litter ... just one example of the strong working relations we have with the poultry industry for the benefit of both the economy and bay restoration efforts."

Mooney said officials at Perdue Farms Inc., Tyson and other poultry companies have discussed possible plants, but are taking a wait-and-see posture.

"I think they are all waiting to see what Allen will do," he said. "After seeing their success, who knows, there may be more plants like that."

An initial smell of manure dissipates during the cooking process, and little to no fumes or odor get into the atmosphere, he said. At the Linkwood plant, chicken litter from poultry houses -- about 90 percent droppings and 10 percent wood -- would arrive by truck for deposit in a fuel feed building where it would then be burned at a high temperature, he said.

"There is virtually nothing discharged into the air," he said. "It burns very hot, and there is no smell."

Protein would burn, but calcium, potassium oxide, phosphorus pentoxide and other ash byproducts would be separated and transported out of state for possible sale as organic fertilizer, he said.

"It could be used in organic farming in parts of the country that have no water runoff problems," he said. "There are wonderful (potential) uses."

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