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Mascoma pilot plant goes on line

By Anna Austin | February 04, 2009

Web exclusive posted March 2, 2009, at 10:41 a.m. CST

Boston-based cellulosic ethanol developer Mascoma Corp. reported that its 200,000-gallon-per-year demonstration facility in Rome, N.Y., has begun producing ethanol.

Mascoma began construction of the plant in early 2008 and reached completion in December.

On behalf of the state, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority and the New York Power Authority provided partial funding for the facility, an agreement which was made in December 2006.

The Rome facility has the flexibility to operate on a variety of feedstocks. "Over the years we will be using a variety of different feedstocks, while we explore different possibilities for our commercial facility for five, or even ten years down the line," said Kate Casolaro, a Mascoma spokeswoman. "As we are focusing on wood chips for our first commercial facility in Michigan, in New York we'll initially be testing wood chips, but we will be using switchgrass, corn stover and sugarcane bagasse at various points in our process testing."

In early October, Mascoma received a \$23.5 million grant from the state of Michigan to build a 40 MMgy commercial-scale cellulosic ethanol facility, which is expected to be completed between 2011 and 2012.

The company has partnered with local businesses to obtain feedstock supplies for its pilot-scale New York plant and is currently purchasing wood chips from a local sawmill.

Casolaro said although the capacity of the facility is 200,000 gallons, its output will fluctuate. "The fuel produced will be used for testing, and we will send some over to General Motors to test it in their engines," she said. "We will hold some small events at which we will showcase GM cars running on the fuel."

In May, GM announced it had provided an undisclosed monetary investment to Mascoma and completed an agreement with the company to evaluate materials and other fuels produced by Mascoma for engine applications. The two companies also announced they would collaborate on expanding Mascoma's commercialization projects on a global level. (Read "GM, Marathon invest in cellulosic ethanol's future.")

"At some point, if we end up producing a lot ethanol, we may blend and sell it," Casolaro said. "But primarily, it will be used for testing and demonstration to ensure that we can continue to improve our technology by refining the numerous variables that will make this the most efficient, low-cost, low-carbon process possible."