

PreferredBio

Crookston, Minn.--Eco-friendly, bio-based products made from agricultural and natural resources are gaining popularity among U.S. consumers. And the largest U.S. consumer – the federal government — is now mandated to purchase bioproducts over their petroleum-based counterparts if they are available and equal in quality and price.

AURI's Randy Hilliard wants to find ways to bring those advantages home.

Hilliard, AURI project director in Crookston, supports a local version of the federal BioPreferred program that gives federal agencies access to a catalog of bioproducts such as packaging material, lubricants, adhesives and other products.

The federal program is gradually adding more products to its "preferred" list of bio-based products, which are defined as commercial or industrial goods (non-food or feed) made with a significant amount of biological, forestry or agricultural products such as lubricants, industrial oils, starch-plastic cutlery, food containers, soaps, cleaners, fuel additives, coolants, fertilizers, inks, building material and paint strippers.

Federal agencies purchase about \$400 billion annually in goods and services. Many agencies using bioproducts "have found them to have comparable or superior performance to their petroleum counterparts," states the BioPreferred Web site.



"We started looking at what we could do in Minnesota," says Hilliard. "The first thing I wanted to do was get a better handle on the industry — on companies manufacturing biomaterial."

AURI contracted with the Southwest Marketing Assistance Center in Marshall to survey manufacturers and consumers on what drives the bioproducts market. "We wanted to find out what they are doing with them. If they aren't making or using bioproducts, why not? What kinds of issues and problems are they running into?"

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BioOpportunities

Austin, Minn.--Minnesota could be uniquely positioned to capitalize on a growing interest in bio-based products. With significant research capability and abundant natural resources, the state could benefit from development of that industry.

That message was presented at a Growing Bio conference held in Austin May 21 and 22. The event, organized by the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF), brought together business and community leaders, researchers and educators to consider the opportunities bio-based businesses could present to the region.

Keynote speaker Mark Drabenstott, Director and Research Professor for the RUPRI Center for Regional Competitiveness at the University of Missouri-Columbia told conference participants the southern Minnesota region needs to build on its assets in order to compete in the global economy.

With research institutions such as Mayo Clinic, the Hormel Institute, the University of Minnesota and AURI having a presence in the region to compliment world-class agricultural production, southern Minnesota could be prime soil for bio-based business development.



Mark Drabenstott, RUPRI

"What it takes to win is to create a regional strategy, build robust regional partnerships, deliberately pursue innovation and grow entrepreneurship," Drabenstott says. "Regions need to identify their competitive advantage and economic assets."

Drabenstott and the SMIF will be conducting a year-long asset mapping project for a 30-county region in southern Minnesota. This process will help identify the region's competitive advantage, its unexploited resources and help determine where bio-based business development could take place. Ten roundtable meetings are planned for later this summer to help in mapping the available assets and plan a strategy for moving forward.

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“What we learned from consumers is there are many who don’t have the information they need,” Hilliard says. “From the manufacturers, it came down to marketing more than anything else. They said, ‘show me there is a market and we’ll make the products.’”

Hilliard has met with grower groups and state and local officials interested in getting a procurement program in Minnesota, similar to the federal BioPreferred. “We were going to do something on a state level but decided we should get a local model first to show some success and what works.”

AURI is working with the Rural Minnesota Energy Board that represents 17 counties in southwest Minnesota — a joint-powers board that initially dealt with wind-related projects. “We approached them to see if they would have an interest promoting bioproducts,” Hilliard says. “They recently passed a resolution encouraging all 17 counties to go this direction. So the direction now is to get a model going at a county level.”

More information on this topic will be available in the July issue of Ag Innovation News.



AURI project and technical staff are involved with projects trying to move bio-based materials into new products and new markets.



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