

from the Wednesday, July 5, 2006 issue of *The Pilot*:

'Biomass' Plant Eyed For Robbins

By John Chappell, Staff Writer

Robbins is in the running for a new kind of power plant that generates electricity from manure and other "biomass" fuels.

A company called Fibrowatt USA has narrowed its site search to three places in central North Carolina. Robbins is one of them.

The technology comes from Britain, where Fibrowatt Limited built the world's first generator fueled entirely by "chicken coop sweepings" or "chicken litter." Last week, three men from Moore County made a whirlwind trip to England and back to see for themselves.

Standing on the edge of a Boy Scout Camp in Suffolk, Ray Ogden, David Cummings and Harry Hubreth gazed up a green and grassy slope at a gray building. The air was fresh and clear, carrying no trace of any chicken yard or hint of what was going on inside.

"One of their plants is actually in the middle of a national forest," said Ogden, executive director of Moore County Partners in Progress. He'd brought along Cummings, chairman of the Moore County Board of Commissioners, and Harry Hubreth, president of Moore-Force (Moore for a clean environment).

This plant at Eye, in Suffolk, burns 160,000 tons of chicken litter a year, fueling its steam-driven 12.7-megawatt generator. Another plant the three visited, in Thetford, is the largest chicken-litter-fueled plant in the world. Its 38.5-megawatt generator is Europe's largest biomass-fueled electricity producer. Thetford is centered in England's poultry-producing region and consumes 420,000 tons of litter each year.

What's left is an ash that is then sold as high-quality fertilizer. Only a whiff of white steam drifting lazily from a single tall chimney gives any indication of the fires within.

"I used to tell people about poultry houses that it smells like money to me," said Cummings, a poultry farmer. "But this doesn't have any scent at all."

Poultry farmers, in England and here, spread poultry house floors with "litter" -- any of a number of kinds of dry soft material that absorbs and mixes with droppings, helping keep the barn dry.

"I think the process they use, the litter in the barn, makes it stay pretty dry," Hubreth said. "It can't be above a certain moisture content. Most farmers here, I believe, use sawdust. They spread those huge buildings with it. They buy sawdust and put that in for the birds to walk on, most of them. We commented that the litter in England looks a little different."

The reason for a total lack of odor is that the litter comes to a Fibrowatt plant in sealed trucks. Inside the plant, trucks dump the litter onto twin conveyors in a "fuel hall." The conveyors carry the litter into the plant's moving-grate boiler.

Empty trucks next go into a tunnel-shaped washer building -- something like a drive-through car wash -- where they are sanitized and sealed again before returning to the highways for another load.

"The most important thing for me is the environmental aspect of it," Hubreth said. "Phosphorus (from phosphate fertilizers) is building up in our fields. It builds up over time. This process is getting rid of a product that is becoming a nuisance for us and turning it into something useful. I was very impressed with its cleanliness and lack of odor."

'Could Be Huge'

Moore County produces 26,000 tons of its own chicken litter a year. Farmers have to file plans for disposing of it and get state approval. Now they might be able to sell it.

"This could be huge for Robbins," Ogden said. "We have been looking at several sites in the general Robbins area. They are planning to build a \$100 to \$150 million plant, with 80 to 85 jobs right there."

If Brian Allen hadn't glanced at an out-of-county newspaper, Ogden might never have heard about Fibrowatt.

"I got to reading a story about this plant -- agriculture biomass, renewable energy -- looking at locating in Montgomery County," Allen said. "The story said they had not made a decision. I said to myself, 'We have more poultry farms here.' That's when the light switch came on."

Allen, vice president of Northern Moore Tomorrow, called NMT president Noah Phillips. Phillips called Mickey Brown, mayor of Robbins, and Brown got in touch with Ogden. Before long, Fibrowatt's Eric Jenkins was in Robbins meeting with Brown and town commissioners behind closed doors.

"I thought it was amazing for this gentleman, Eric Jenkins, to come here," Brown said. "He made an outstanding presentation. I thought it was amazing, just unbelievable, what a perfect fit this would be for our community, our farmers."

'A Good Fit for Us'

A growing spirit of cooperation between NMT, town government, Partners in Progress, county commissioners, local farmers and others helps the county move quickly on opportunities like this, Allen said.

"This is how leads come about -- how we (NMT) find out about things," he said. "Somebody doesn't have to live here in Robbins. Let us know. If you put a bug in Ray Ogden's ear, he's on it. Ray is a go-getter."

Allen is confident that Robbins is the best place Fibrowatt could find -- 10 miles from the middle of North Carolina, surrounded by poultry farms and on an energetic growing curve of its own.

"From what I understand about Fibrowatt, a lot of other companies will ride their coattails," Allen said. "I think it could be 50 trucks, 100 drivers, because they run two shifts. That is a lot of jobs right there, not even counting jobs in the plant. Now our chicken farmers need a permit to get rid of their waste. We are helping our environment by taking care of this litter and by providing a renewable energy source for electricity."

Hubreth, a board member of Sandhills Area Land Trust, is a committed environmentalist. He's sold on this technology and happy it also brings employment.

"Seems a good fit for us," Hubreth said. "There are a lot of jobs there -- and trucking jobs created hauling litter to plant and fertilizer ash away. It's a stable source of green power. Seems like a win-win situation. I know it is more expensive than nuclear power -- it is not totally inexpensive -- but it is competitive, because power companies are mandated to buy a certain amount."

'No Warmer Welcome'

Robbins, Allen thinks, has at least a 50-50 chance of getting the plant, if not better.

Proximity to two fuel sources -- manure and bedding from Sandhills horse farms, as well as chickenhouse litter from Foothills farms -- could tip the balance toward Robbins. The plant at Eye takes 7 percent of its fuel input in the form of feathers, with trials continuing to increase the feather burn up to 20 percent. About 12 percent of fuel burn there is supplied from other agricultural residues like horse bedding.

Though not every community would welcome such a facility, Brown says the company wouldn't have to fear hostility in Robbins.

"We would welcome them with open arms," he said. "We are so excited."

NMT's Allen couldn't agree more.

"If they care about community opinion and community welcome," he said, "they couldn't expect any warmer welcome than we'll give them."

John Chappell can be reached at 783-5841 or by e-mail at jchappell@thepilot.com.