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Biofuels and India: The story so far

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Spiralling fuel prices and the global uproar about rapidly-declining reserves of fossil fuels have prompted power producers to examine other, commercially viable and environmentally-friendly alternatives. In India, one of the strongest contenders for the top spot as the next-best substitute for petrol and diesel is biofuel, which is extracted from the seeds of the Jatropha plant.

Extracting benefits

The use of Jatropha oil as fuel in India is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, this biodiesel has been fuelling remote rural and forest communities for many years now.

Jatropha oil is of special interest to Indian authorities for a number of reasons.

- >> The Jatropha plant can easily be cultivated in wastelands. Hence, unlike other sources of biodiesel, growing this crop will not encroach upon valuable farmland, and will also serve as an additional means of income for Indian farmers. According to former Indian President, Dr Abdul Kalam, a strong believer in Jatropha as a biofuel, nearly half of the country's 6,00,000 sq. km of wasteland is suitable for Jatropha cultivation
- >> Jatropha oil is cost effective, since it can be used directly after extraction, without the need for any additional refining.
- >> The cultivation of Jatropha crop is relatively easier, as the leaves of these plants are unpalatable to livestock. This ensures that the plants remain intact during the sapling stage, unlike many other types of tree saplings.
- >> The prolific use of this oil will eventually reduce the country's dependence on fossil fuel imports. The money thus saved can be diverted to other, more productive uses such as for building infrastructure.
- >> The rapid pace of expansion within the domestic automobile industry will only increase the already overwhelming demand on the nation's meagre fossil-fuel reserves-an eventuality that can be easily circumvented with the help of biofuel

Taking stock

In 2008, the Government of India announced its National Biofuel Policy, which envisions meeting close to 20 percent of the domestic diesel demand from biofuels. This means that 14,00,000 sq. km of land will have to be set aside for the cultivation of fuel-producing plants, up from today's 5,000 sq. km. Of this, the government has already identified 4,00,000 sq. km for land for Jatropha crop.

In a bid to encourage Indian farmers to take up Jatropha cultivation, the government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with bio-oils specialist D1 Mohan Bio Oils Ltd to hand out loans worth Rs 1.3 billion to farmers; D1 Mohan will sponsor the purchase of the Jatropha seeds. Several Indian states are also looking into Jatropha cultivation with renewed interest, with the state governments teaming up with private players to finance and promote Jatropha-planting projects. For example, the Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) and the Maharashtra State Farming Corporation Ltd have jointly set up a Jatropha seed-based biodiesel venture, while Chattisgarh is well on its way to becoming a biofuel self-reliant state by the year 2015.

Unlike other countries that are still struggling with the problem of devoting land that could potentially be used for agricultural purposes to the exclusive cultivation of fuel-producing crop, India is uniquely poised to tap into this eco-friendly fossil-fuel alternative. In addition to helping the country to dramatically reduce its carbon footprint, biofuels can also earn valuable foreign income for the country through exports, while also providing the agricultural community with a means to generate more revenue.

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