

# Sawdust landfill could fuel economy

June 05, 2007

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ENERGY REPORTER

HEARST, Ont.—Convergence Ethanol's choice of Hearst as the home of a cellulose-to-ethanol plant wasn't immediately obvious to the community. But it soon became clear that this largely francophone town, with its rich history of sawmills and wood factories established in the early 1900s by French-Canadian entrepreneurs, had something valuable to offer – and that tends to get thrown away.

Dave Scott from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources says nearly a century of processing lumber in Hearst has led to an enormous accumulation of sawdust and other wood shavings known as "heritage woodpiles."

It wasn't reused then like it is today for making wood-based products such as particleboard. Instead, it was treated as waste and put into landfill sites scattered across the area. The sites were capped off and have been there for decades, left to blend into the surrounding geography as they slowly ferment. "A layperson would drive over them and not even know they're there," Scott says. "It might look like a parking lot or an abandoned farm field. Some of them are levelled, but there's one right in the town of Hearst that looks more like a hill."

It might remain landfill if it weren't for technological innovation and emerging markets for renewable fuels. Mandates in Canada and the United States requiring that ethanol be mixed with gasoline, as well as the rising availability of "flex-fuel" vehicles that can run on 85 per cent blends of ethanol, has led to an aggressive expansion of biofuel production facilities.

Most of these facilities produce ethanol from corn, but new biotechnologies are rapidly emerging that use complex cocktails of enzymes and bacteria to turn non-food resources such as wood chips into "cellulosic ethanol." Convergence Ethanol, which did not reply to calls from the *Toronto Star*, connected the dots. It saw Hearst's heritage wood as a gold mine of virtually free ingredients for producing up to 20 per cent of Ontario's ethanol needs.

Scott says the sawmill residues, when mixed with fresh forestry waste from nearby logging operations, provides enough material to profitably run a large cellulosic-ethanol plant for at least 15 years. Impressed with the business case, Convergence Ethanol formed a subsidiary called Hearst Ethanol One Inc. and talked up the town's potential as the bioenergy capital of the north.

"It would certainly be good for our community," Scott says.

The project remains on hold, but Hearst is keeping its options open and welcomes discussions with other companies.