

Poet CEO Jeff Broin tells RETECH 2010 that biofuels can replace all U.S. gasoline

By Jon H. Harsch

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Washington, Feb. 3 – Poet CEO Jeff Broin told an audience of renewable energy innovators at RETECH 2010 Wednesday a compelling story about American ingenuity. He recalled how his father “built a home-made system to dry our grain using renewable ag waste as the fuel” and was so frustrated by government programs idling U.S. cropland that “he built a small-scale ethanol plant . . . to put the excess grain we were producing to good use.” That one Minnesota farmer’s initial frustration led directly to Poet becoming the world’s leading ethanol producer with 26 plants spread across seven states, now producing over 1.54 billion gallons of ethanol a year.

Broin said “Today, the U.S. ethanol industry has over 13 billion gallons of capacity which is almost 10 percent of our country’s gasoline usage. . . . this is fuel made right here in the United States by American workers and family farmers, reducing our need to import foreign oil while significantly reducing emissions.”

Broin predicted that “As agricultural yields increase and cellulosic ethanol is commercialized, biofuels could realistically replace the use of gasoline in this country. . . . Combining the tremendous potential of both grain and cellulosic ethanol, the feedstock is there and the technology is there to produce over 140 billion gallons of ethanol or roughly the equivalent of the amount of gasoline that our country uses every year. Not only can this be done, but it can be done in a very sustainable way using only waste materials and excess grain, not using any more land while increasing our food supply, achieving energy independence, and reducing emissions.”



Poet CEO Jeff Broin speaking at the RETECH 2010 conference. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

Charting yield increases, Broin pointed out that “One of the things we’re really good at in the U.S. is growing things. . . grain yields are improving at a faster rate than ever before . . . this past year American farmers produced an all-time record corn crop, with an average yield of over 165 bushels per acre. This record crop of over 13 billion bushels was produced on seven million fewer acres than the last record crop. And the major seed companies expect this trend to continue, potentially bringing crop yields up to 300 bushels per acre by 2030.”

Broin warned that as yields continue to climb, “If we don’t use this excess grain for things such as biofuels, we’ll be back to the days of paying farmers not to produce, which in turn will burden U.S. taxpayers while reducing investment and innovation in farming.” In a question perhaps meant for nearby Congress where legislation has stalled, Broin asked “Why not use this tremendous resource to become more energy independent instead?”

Switching from the U.S. to a world perspective, Broin concluded that “Biofuels can transform agriculture on a worldwide basis. What I’ve seen this industry do in the United States can be the blueprint for bringing many parts of the world out of poverty while solving major hunger and energy problems.” He noted that this transformation would not mean cutting down rain forests because some 1.2 billion acres of previously farmed land have been idled by low commodity prices. “The key to bringing this land back into production and increasing yields on existing land to provide food, feed, fiber, and fuel is a sustainable price on commodities,” he said. “What the world needs is sustainable ag prices . . . The only possible way to have sustainable agricultural prices is to have a strong biofuels market which can help keep commodity prices at a level at or above the cost of production. . . Managed properly, this can be done in a very environmentally friendly way.”

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