The Fuel Sell

By Luke Simpson, Associate Editor, Chem.Info

It's the culmination of over 40 years work, combining technology developed by NASA in the 1950s with cutting edge biofuel production techniques using purpose-built microorganisms. Coskata appears to be doing what no other cellulosic ethanol startup has done: Proving that the technology works on a large scale.

Well that's the message that representatives from Coskata and its partners, Alter NRG and GM, were making sure we understood at the unveiling of Coskata's semi-commercial pilot plant [1] in Madison, PA.

The presentations included projections of 96 percent greenhouse gas emission reduction when compared to traditional vehicle fuel production and use, which was said to be a conservative estimate.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg. Coskata was able to project numbers and costs that would make any other cellulosic ethanol startup green with envy:

- Reduced water usage.
- Feedstock flexible process with minimal pretreatment.
- No enzymes required.

We'll be taking a closer look at the Coskata process, feedstocks and the implications it could have for the processing industry in our upcoming November/December issue—including co-locating cellulosic ethanol plants with existing industrial facilities—but on the day I was struck by an even more important event that we were witnessing.

Up until now, biofuel startups have promised big things based on laboratory results and small-scale pilot plants, while interested parties stood on the sidelines, impressed but unconvinced that it could work in the real world. Last Thursday we hit the next level.

Those biofuel companies that have not been crippled by recent economic events are moving to build minimum-scale engineering plants designed to prove that large-scale production is possible. Coskata's Madison facility was designed to show that the technology can indeed be used to output 50 to 100 million gallons of cellulosic ethanol per year.

So while I'm sure that R&D efforts will continue, I'm bracing myself for an onslaught

of PR and marketing as these companies fight to be the Microsoft of the biofuel industry (that said, everyone I've spoken with agrees that we will have a number of energy solutions). Unfortunately, companies that fall behind at this stage will struggle to compete with the companies that know how to get their name and product out into the public's view, and no one has done this better than Coskata. Who do you think will emerge as the leader in cellulosic ethanol production? Drop me a line at luke.simpson@advantagemedia.com [2].

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