Chu visits DuPont biofuels lab(2)

RANDALL CHASE - Associated Press - Associated Press

Energy Secretary Steven Chu observed Wednesday the DuPont Co.'s work on biofuels during a visit to the company's experimental station in Wilmington.

Chu joined DuPont executives for a tour of a biofuels lab after giving a speech at TechCon, an annual weeklong meeting of DuPont scientists and engineers from across the globe.

Jan Koninckx, global business director of biofuels for DuPont, briefed Chu on the company's efforts to commercialize production of cellulosic ethanol, a fuel produced from agricultural leftovers such as corn stalks and leaves, and biobutanol, a corn-based fuel that has certain advantages over ethanol, including a higher energy content.

DuPont received a total of about $22.5 million in Department of Energy subsidies several years ago for research and development of those technologies.

Chu and DuPont officials said that investment is paying off as the company looks toward commercial-scale production of both fuels by 2014.

"What you're seeing is a little bit of research dollars ... is now turning into hundreds of millions of dollars of private-sector investment," Chu said, describing it as "money well spent."

Koninckx and Tom Connelly, executive vice president and chief innovation officer for DuPont, said the company currently has no plans to seek further DOE assistance for production of biofuels.

"Our investments now are all ours," Connelly said.

Koninckx said what DuPont is really looking for is stability in the regulatory framework for biofuels.

Earlier this year, DuPont won the 2012 Sustainable Biofuels Award in the Sustainable Feedstock Innovation Category at the World Biofuels Markets 2012 Congress.

DuPont won the award for its Stover Harvest Collection Project, a collaborative effort with Iowa State University, farm equipment manufacturers and local farmers to collect and store corn stover for conversion into biofuel.

DuPont plans to use corn stover — the stalks, cobs and leaves left in fields after corn is harvested, to fuel its cellulosic ethanol plant in Nevada, Iowa.

Koninckx said the plant should be operating by late 2013 or early 2014, with a capacity of 28 million to 30 million gallons.

DuPont also plans to retrofit a facility at a yet-to-be-named location, likely somewhere in the Midwest, for commercial production of biobutanol.

Chu said increased production of biofuels can help the U.S. ease its dependence on oil.

"It's the most expensive form of energy we use, and it affects the whole geopolitical world," said Chu, who took the opportunity to promote the extension of tax credits for renewable energy programs that are set to expire soon.

"We need to keep the momentum going," he said.

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