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New York can be a leader into sustainable future

Sunday, May 23, 2004

By **Cornelius B. Murphy Jr.**

The world's energy practices need to change. We in New York are poised not only to drive the engine that powers that change, but to establish its new course. COMMENT

At this critical time, New York is in a uniquely favorable position because of the significant technical expertise of our business leaders, researchers and educators. These are the people and institutions that can best determine how to incorporate New York's vast supply of renewable resources in providing a solution to our energy challenges.

New York has two key elements leading to success: 1) a more than adequate supply of natural resources, and 2) enough skilled people with vision to make a difference.

This abundance of talent and resources is set against a backdrop of international and regional issues. Americans must move quickly toward developing more energy sources that will reduce our dependence on non-renewable foreign sources. Americans have the ability to generate 20 percent of our energy and basic chemicals using renewable resources by the year 2020.

Central New Yorkers are beginning to meet this critical challenge. If managed wisely, these efforts will help re-energize a weakened economy, protect against petroleum shortages and enhance our national security. Action has begun, but continued support from political, business and education leaders will hasten progress in this vital area. Consider:

The SUNY Center for Sustainable and Renewable Energy, established in 2002 and based in Syracuse at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, serves as a clearinghouse for research and developments in areas including hydrogen

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generation and storage, biofuels and solar power applications. This positions Syracuse in the middle of some extraordinary, innovative developments that can help solve our energy challenges.

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Another reason for optimism is Northeast Biofuels' plan to invest \$140 million to convert the former Miller Brewery to a 100-million-gallon-per-year ethanol production facility. In addition to producing gasoline oxygenators and extenders from renewable sources, this facility has the ability to create 300 construction jobs and 70 full-time manufacturing, engineering, marketing and management positions.

Central and Western New York provide locations for the experimental growth of the alternative energy source willow biomass, that can be co-fired and gasified to provide a clean, easily renewable source of energy. In partnership with AgriGenesis Biosciences Limited, researchers at ESF and the SUNY Center are at work improving both the cellulose yield of these fast-growing plants, and methods to convert that cellulose to ethanol even more efficiently. This application of biotechnology to help meet our renewable energy requirements is exciting and innovative.

Researchers at ESF and the SUNY Center are also at work developing a biologic fermentation process to produce hydrogen from biomass. This includes using hemicellulose, traditionally a less-valuable element of woody plants, as a feedstock to produce hydrogen to be used in place of petroleum products. And the college is working on a patent-pending series of techniques to produce biopolymers, or plastics from wood instead of conventional plastics from petroleum-based carbon.

Gov. George Pataki clearly understands the importance of these initiatives. In his 2004 State of the State Address, he recognized that "The worldwide market for clean energy technologies is expected to grow to nearly \$100 million a year over the next 10 years." He added: "I want New York companies to be the major beneficiaries of this emerging market."

At the governor's direction, the Syracuse Center of Excellence has been expanded to include clean energy research, and to have increased partnerships in this area with the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, ESF and Cornell University. Clearly, the work has already begun here in New York.

New York has 18.5 million acres of forest land and an established forest-products industry. In addition, New York has 600,000 acres of non-productive farmland that can be used to grow clean-energy-producing crops. We have the ability to produce biomass through agriforestry and conventional agriculture to support a biofuels and bioproducts industry. Clearly, the resources are here.

New York, largely through ESF, the SUNY Center and the Syracuse Center of Excellence, has a history of involvement with biofuels and bioproducts that is as old as its involvement with the forest-products industry. With the leadership of our governor, support from our legislators, the entrepreneurial spirit of our business leaders and engagement of our university research faculty and facilities, New York can be a springboard to a sustainable future. Cornelius B. Murphy Jr. is president of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse.

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