



The Athens Messenger

Thursday, March 27, 2008

Green state

Summit envisions region as leader in alternative energies

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Special to The Messenger

Thursday, March 27, 2008



Messenger photo | John Halley

U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown speaks at a round-table discussion on energy and the economy that was held Wednesday at Ohio University. Looking on is Mark Weinberg, director of the OU Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs.

Southeastern Ohio already has a long association with the energy industry, and the region could become a leader in new, alternative and "green" energy.

That was the message Tuesday and Wednesday during a series of meetings held at Ohio University as part of a green energy summit.

Hosted by OU's Consortium for Energy, Economics and the Environment, the Pew Environment Group and Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, the summit was part of a series sponsored by the consortium and the OU Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs on green business and economic development.

This week's summit brought governmental and business leaders together to discuss possibilities for the region, and highlighted several successful green businesses already operating in the region.

While coal and natural gas supplies in Southeastern Ohio helped generate more than \$1.5 billion for Ohio's economy in 2006, alternative forms of energy such as wind and solar power, along with new technology such as fuel cells powered by algae, will be added to the mix, said Scott Miller, director of the consortium.

"We hope to spur discussion and highlight business already going on in Southeastern Ohio," Miller said.

"Ohio can lead the way in alternative energy and become the Silicon Valley of energy," Brown told the summit via a videotaped address on Tuesday. Although he was unable to attend Tuesday's event in person, Brown did visit campus on Wednesday to participate in a roundtable discussion with various business leaders, researchers and others.

"We want to take advantage of the market system with developing green energy," said Tom Bullock, the Pew Environment Group's Ohio representative.

Jeff Wilson and Ryan Wright of Bellisio Foods in Jackson told of efforts by the packaged-food manufacturer to reduce waste at its 675,000-square-foot facility. The company, which employs 1,200 hourly workers and 170 salaried employees, produces more than 2,000 packaged meat and pasta meals each day.

Such activity generated more than 6,000 to 7,000 pounds of waste per day, a figure that has been reduced to less than 1,000 pounds this year.

By utilizing a variety of methods, from pre-treatment of waste sent into the Jackson sewer system to use of treatment methods that capture then burn methane gas from waste, the company is saving more than \$1 million a year in costs associated with getting rid of that waste, Wright said.

"If you want to do the right thing, this is the right thing," Wright said.

Benjamin Schafer, president of American Hydrogen Corp., said the goal of his company's new plant in Tupper Plains is to produce zero waste and become a certified green business by 2009.

American Hydrogen is commercializing research from Ohio University that uses an ammonia-to-hydrogen process to produce hydrogen for less than 25 percent of the current cost. Such innovation could lead to hydrogen replacing gasoline.

Noting the growing demand for oil worldwide, "we need a source of replacement energy for imported oil," Schafer said. He noted that, eventually, American Hydrogen's total power and energy needs will be supplied by its own products.

Also featured at the summit was the Athens-based Sunpower Inc., which is the world's leading developer of free-piston machines. Based on technology developed by OU scientists, the company's products are used in engines, coolers, cryocoolers and compressors and are environmentally friendly.

Neill Lane, president of Sunpower, said his company's products can be used in connection with solar power generators, which are expected to see a growth of 30 to 40 percent during the next 15 years.

He said Southeastern Ohio can be a leader in the production of alternative energy forms, much the way Denmark is a leader in the manufacture of wind generators. The Scandinavian country produces more than half of all wind generators, a fact that came about because government and business leaders in the country long ago decided to be a leader in the field.

"Clean, green energy is a high business opportunity," Lane said.

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