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*Thursday, Oct. 25, 2007*

## **K-STATE SOCIOLOGISTS USING DEPT. OF ENERGY GRANT TO PROBE SOCIOLOGICAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ETHANOL PLANTS IN KANSAS AND IOWA**

MANHATTAN — Scientists and economists are no strangers to discussions about alternative fuels, but a recently announced research grant means that some sociologists at Kansas State University are joining the conversation.

K-State was awarded a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to study the social, cultural and economic impacts of the "biofuels revolution" on rural communities in Kansas and Iowa. The \$696,827 grant comes from the department's Ethical, Legal and Societal Implications of Research on Alternative Bioenergy Technologies, Synthetic Genomes or Nanotechnologies program. The researchers from K-State's department of sociology, anthropology and social work are: Theresa Selfa, assistant professor; Laszlo Kulcsar, assistant professor; Gerad Middendorf, associate professor; and Richard Goe, professor. They are joined by Carmen Bain, assistant professor of sociology at Iowa State University.

"There has been very little research into the social dimensions of the bioeconomy," said Selfa, who is the grant's principal investigator. "We are among a small number of social science researchers examining this topic, which is why this grant is very important."

As the United States works to reduce its dependence on foreign oil and expand the development of alternative fuels, ethanol plants are springing up in rural communities across the Midwest, including those in Kansas and Iowa. Although such plants often are touted as economic and population drivers, Selfa said that the social and economic costs and benefits haven't been assessed with in-depth case study research. The project will examine four Kansas communities and two Iowa communities to see whether claims that ethanol plants will revitalize the towns hold true.

The communities to be studied will be chosen based on several factors, including population size, location of an existing or planned ethanol plant, and availability or constraints on a plentiful water source for the ethanol plant. The researchers will use demographic analysis, population surveys, content from local newspapers and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

(more)

Selfa said one aspect the researchers will study is whether new populations are moving to these communities because of ethanol-related jobs and how this affects the community. They will examine the attitudes that ethanol plant workers and farmers have about the opportunities that ethanol plants present. The researchers also are curious about how much local communities are investing to bring ethanol plants to their towns and how benefits from ethanol plants differ depending on whether they are owned locally or nonlocally.

"We believe that local ownership would bring more benefit," Selfa said.

The researchers want to see how the scale of the plant affects the community economically and socially. For instance, Selfa said they want to examine whether smaller plants distribute their benefits — and costs — among communities in a way that large, centralized plants don't.

Another aspect of the research will look at how communities and government officials balance the need for economic growth and jobs with the reality of declining water availability, especially in places like western Kansas.

"How do they balance water demands between agricultural crops for food versus for fuel and then for household, municipal and industrial uses?" Selfa said.

She said the researchers plan to use what they learn to inform policymakers and rural communities about the possible benefits and limitations of bioenergy development.

Collaborators from K-State include the office of educational innovation and evaluation at the College of Education, the Kansas Population Center and the Kansas Center for Agricultural Resources and the Environment. Other collaborators are the Kansas Rural Center and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development at Iowa State.

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