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Reserachers to study impact of biofuels

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Biofuel development takes on another aspect, this time with sociology.

Sociologists from Iowa State and Kansas State will study the effects of biofuel plants on farmers and rural communities.

The Department of Energy awarded a three-year grant of \$696,827 for a research project on the social, economic and cultural effects of biofuel plants. The research is intended for use in making informed decisions and policies about biofuel plants and understanding their impact.

"It's important to know about the social implications and the social dynamics," said Theresa Selfa, assistant professor of sociology, anthropology and social work at Kansas State and principal investigator for the project. "I think we're going to have a pretty unbiased examination and we'll see what we find out, whether it's beneficial, or how beneficial, in socioeconomic terms."

The project will examine case studies in six rural communities in Kansas and Iowa.

"We're picking communities at the forefront of what has been happening in biofuel development and we think the findings will be indicative [of the condition of communities with biofuel plants]," said Carmen Bain, assistant professor of sociology at Iowa State.

They will use several different methods for analyzing the case studies, such as analyzing local newspapers, surveys, focus groups with farmers and plant workers and interviews with key stakeholders, Bain said.

From this, they hope to gain knowledge of the impacts and sort out the real effects.

"There are a lot of claims being made about why this industry is a good thing. But there's been no research to look at how accurate are these claims, what are the different benefits of these communities, but what are some of the pitfalls, downfalls of this economic development," Bain said.

Bain did not want to make any claims about what they hoped to find, but said that they wanted to find out the effects and make that information available to policy makers.

"I mean the important thing is that we find how communities are dealing with and responding with this new industry and how a farm is dealing with, and responding to, this new industry," Bain said.

The grant for the project was supplied by the Department of Energy's Ethical, Legal and Societal Implications of Research on Alternative Bioenergy Technologies, Synthetic Genomics or Nanotechnologies program.

Although she did not really know the particulars on why the project was selected for the competitive grant, Bain thinks part of the reason is that they are using several different methods of research and involve more than one state.

Part of the reason Iowa was included was its involvement with biofuel.

"Iowa is leading the country in terms of building ethanol plants. More of these issues have had time to unfold where in Kansas the industry is a lot newer. Some of the issues we can look at in Iowa are perhaps still evolving in Kansas," Bain said.

Members of the research team from Kansas State are Laszlo Kulcsar, assistant professor of sociology, anthropology and social work; Gerad Middendorf, associate professor of sociology, anthropology and social work; and W. Richard Goe, professor of sociology, anthropology and social work and graduate program coordinator. The North Central Regional Center for Rural Development at Iowa State, the Kansas Rural Center and the Kansas Center for Agricultural Resources and the Environment were also involved.

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