

# Manager's goal: Keep farmers, truckers happy



Photo by Dave Fox, for Today's Farm  
Neal Jakel, general manager of the Illinois River Energy ethanol plant in Rochelle, is excited about current production levels, and the anticipated growth in the ethanol business in the coming years. Lessening U.S. dependence on oil and petroleum is important for Americans in general, as well as for the environment, according to Jakel.

## Locals ship 150 loads of corn a day to ethanol plant

BY DAVE FOX  
Special to Today's Farm

ROCHELLE – Grain trucks full of corn rolled by, slowed, and were checked in near the office.

Farmers, usually talkative, focused on keeping the steady stream of traffic moving. Another load dumped means more money in the bank. Truck after truck, they kept coming.

Hectic days are the norm for Neal Jakel, general manager of the Illinois River Energy ethanol plant in Rochelle.

Early morning is a busy time for Jakel; between checking messages, conferring with employees, and getting ready for a meeting, he pulled a

library of information from different places in his office to help describe the magnitude of what takes place here on a daily basis.

Much of the design of the plant is centered on being as efficient as possible.

With two truck pits, "we can easily handle 150 trucks [of corn] or more a day," Jakel said.

The average turnaround time is 10 minutes. During that time, trucks are weighed, and corn is checked for moisture content and the percentage of damaged or broken pieces of grain before being dumped.

"Our goal is to keep the truckers and the farmers happy, so they'll want to keep coming back, he said."

Illinois River Energy was started by several Rochelle business people in 2004. GTL Resources bought a majority ownership a year later.

The facility, which

**We can grind 125,000 bushels of corn a day here, and it's all local corn.**

Neal Jakel, manager, Illinois River Energy ethanol plant

employs 68 people, expanded to its current size in 2008.

"We can grind 125,000 bushels of corn a day here, and it's all local corn," Jakel said.

The facility can store as much as 1 million bushels at a time in bins, "but that's just a little over a week's worth for us."

Fifty-two percent of the grain comes directly from area farmers, the rest from area elevators. Up to 150 loads a day come from within about a 40-mile radius of Rochelle.

The plant's location is a key factor to its success, he said.

Part of the Rochelle Enterprise Zone, it is situated on 81 acres at the junction of Interstates 39 and 88, just 3 miles from an intermodal rail container yard and near two major rail lines, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway and Union Pacific. There is adjoining land that may be bought later for future expansion.

About 99 percent of the ethanol produced here is trucked to local markets, Jakel said.

It's an environmentally friendly process: There is practically no waste product, he said. The corn byproduct is converted to "dried distillers grain with solids," a livestock feed supplement.

"It's a very nutrient-rich product. A lot of it is sold and used in this area, but most of it goes to Southeast Asia," he said.

The plant also is a "zero wastewater discharge facility."

ETHANOL CONTINUED ON 9 ▶

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# Plant never uses food-grade corn to make ethanol

## ETHANOL CONTINUED FROM 6

"From a clean perspective, we use less than 3 gallons of water for each gallon of ethanol we produce. [Most of] the water is used in our boiler and our cooling tower facility," and the wastewater is discharged into nearby water ponds or evaporated as steam.

Introduced in the early 1970s as gasohol, the ethanol/gasoline blend has gained in popularity over the years, although many people still don't know how it's made.

"The corn is first ground into a slurry," Jakel said. Enzymes are added to convert the cornstarch into sugars, then yeast is added to turn the sugars

into carbon dioxide and ethanol.

The ethanol is distilled and separated from the corn mash, and the water is removed.

"The final product is a 200-proof alcohol stream," said Jakel, adding that the entire process takes about 50 hours.

The finished product is sold and blended with gasoline at an average rate of 10 percent per gallon. E-85 fuel, used in vehicles with "flex-fuel" motors, has 85 percent ethanol per gallon of gas.

Jakel disputes claims that increased ethanol production eventually will deplete human food supplies, a concern of some environmental groups.

"We don't use any corn here that is consumable

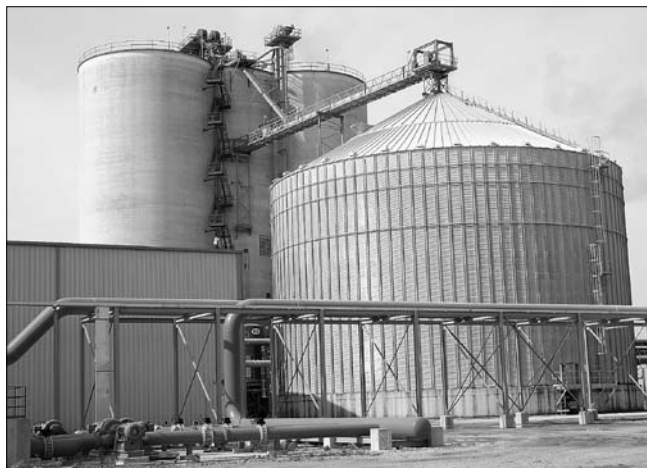


Photo by Dave Fox, for Today's Farm  
Grain bins at the Illinois River Energy plant in Rochelle enable the ethanol producer to store up to a million bushels of corn at one time. At current production rates, "That would last us just over a week," according to General Manager Neal Jakel.

by humans. ... It's all feed corn. We never use food-grade corn in our production."

Ethanol blends benefit

motorists in several ways, he said.

"It burns hotter in the engine, which means it also burns cleaner. As

a result, it drives up the engine's horsepower, which means better mileage, especially when you're pulling heavier loads."

Reducing the nation's dependence on oil and petroleum products is a priority where ethanol production is concerned, Jakel said.

"We need to look at something other than oil use in America long term," he said. "We need to look at helping people to understand oil versus ethanol better."

One way to reduce dependence on oil and petroleum is by increasing the levels of ethanol allowed in gasoline production, he added. The "blend wall" is a regulation set by the federal government and regulat-

ed by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"Initially, the law dictated that we could only blend 10 percent ethanol with the gasoline. Given the amount of gasoline used in America today, that only allows for 13 billion gallons of ethanol to be used.

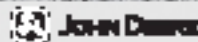
"We're trying to get them to increase the blend wall to E-15 or E-20," Jakel said.

Outside, the trucks kept coming, checking in, dumping their loads. Grain continued its journey to be sent the rest of the way through the process.

Jakel looked out his window with a smile. Gas consumers, farmers, rail lines, truckers, the community – "everyone benefits by this, he said."

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