

Highlands Today: Biofuel To Transform County, Mahoney Says

By Marc Valero

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SEBRING - As the country moves toward energy independence, central Florida will be a key region, U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney told county school board officials and administrators.

"This is going to transform Highlands County," he said Thursday. "We believe that we are going to generate over 10,000 high-paying jobs in this region in the next 10 years."

Biofuel, and specifically cellulosic ethanol, which is a component of nearly all plants, is the key to an economic boost for the area, the congressman said.

"This area is the most bio-diverse area in the United States because of our climate," he said. "Florida and this area that we are in south of Orlando is the biggest biomass producing region in the nation."

Farm communities with corn crops in the Midwest have been transformed by bio-energy, he said. These states' economies are booming and the infrastructure is being improved and the school boards have more money to build facilities, etc.

The definition of ethanol has been changed, which will help Florida, Mahoney said.

"When I got to Washington it was corn," he said. "Now it's everything that grows in Florida"

In order to become the bio-energy capital of the world, the area needs to be able to provide a trained workforce for the energy companies, Mahoney said. "We will be able to harvest this opportunity and it will truly transform," the area if the right things are done educationally at the K-12, community-college and university levels.

Florida farmers have three opportunities: greater demand for fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products; biofuel and the carbon-capture cap-and-trade system, where farmers can sell credits to polluting industries.

As the subject turned to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Superintendent Wally Cox said all eight of the district's elementary schools met more than 90 percent of Florida's stringent Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) criteria.

Though some of the schools received an "A" grade by the state's rules, most of the schools (five) did not meet 100 percent of the required 39 criteria to achieve AYP, he said.

"We need relief in that area," Cox said.

Mahoney responded, "I think we ought to let the principals in those elementary schools decide what they need to do in order to make sure these kids move forward. I think we need to have testing that demonstrates the students are going in the right direction.

"I think that federal funding for schools, that need additional funding, should come based on progress."

Proposed changes to No Child Left Behind still do not address the basic problem with why does Texas get more money though it has lower standards than Florida, he said. "At this stage of the game we are probably going to wait for the new president to see if we can't break the logjam in Congress."