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States meet to fuel future

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GREENVILLE — Tennessee and South Carolina researchers met Monday to find ways to gain more automotive research dollars by working together, even as they drive different routes to find the fuel stop of tomorrow.

South Carolina is heavily committed to hydrogen, building on the strength of the U.S. Department of Energy's Savannah River National Laboratory near Aiken.

Tennessee is leaning on its expertise in extracting energy from vegetable matter. But instead of making whiskey from corn, the state is betting on making Grassoline, an ethanol made from switch grass.

The University of Tennessee will be working with DOE's Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

But congressional leaders from both states meeting near Greenville said they need to work together to win larger federal grants against competition from major research universities.

"My ultimate motive is to have plenty of collaboration between the Savannah River National Lab and the Oak Ridge National Lab," U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., told about 200 people gathered for the Tennessee Valley Corridor Southeast Partnership Event.

The corridor is a nonprofit regional development group with members in Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia.

The Savannah River site is South Carolina's strongest tie to hydrogen research, and its strength is enhanced by cooperation with the University of South Carolina and Clemson University. But South Carolina still can't win in a matchup against a Tennessee team that includes Oak Ridge.

"If we go head to head with them, we lose," Inglis said.

Speakers at the conference touted the benefits of powering cars with grass-derived fuel, hydrogen or just plain, old-fashioned nuclear energy.

The first gallon of Tennessee Grassoline is expected to be produced next summer, the product of about \$300 million in state, federal and private funds, said John Petersen, president of the University of Tennessee.

The project is expected to ramp up to make 1 billion gallons a year, with an anticipated wholesale price of about \$1.20 per gallon, Petersen said.

For every \$1 in cost to make Grassoline, it will yield about \$5.50 in revenues, compared with \$1.40 for ethanol, he said.

Tom Baloga, vice president of engineering at BMW's Spartanburg County plant, said using hydrogen as an alternate fuel for internal combustion engines provides a practical, cheaper bridge to future technologies.

But Peter Brown, associate publisher of Automotive News in Detroit, said his bet is on electric cars, much of it from nuclear power plants.

"Whatever fears there have been about nuclear power are dwarfed by the fears of global warming," he said.

Inglis said he's less concerned about the outcome than gathering the states' energies to discover them.

"We may find other opportunities," he said. "Chance favors the prepared mind."