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Mascoma touts ethanol bioprocess breakthrough

By Efrain Viscarolasaga

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Ethanol technology developer Mascoma Corp. has announced what officials call significant breakthroughs in the use of consolidated bioprocessing (CBP) for producing biofuels from cellulosic biomass.

CBP, recently called "the golden dream" of ethanol production by Helena Chum of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, avoids the need for cellulase enzymes in ethanol production by using engineered microorganisms that produce cellulases and ethanol at high yield in a single step. The result is a cheaper, one-step process for the breakdown and fermentation of cellulosic feedstocks.

Mascoma's advances in the space include work with both bacteria that grow at high temperatures, called thermophiles, and recombinant cellulolytic yeasts. The company's recent results include a 60 percent increase in the volume of ethanol produced by an engineered thermophile, and a 3,000-fold increase in cellulase expression using recombinant, cellulolytic yeast.

According to a statement from Mascoma executive vice president of research, development and operations Jim Flatt, the advances "enable the reduction in operating and capital costs required for cost-effective commercial production of ethanol," and bring Mascoma closer to the commercialization of its product.

Last February, Mascoma announced that its pilot facility in Rome, N.Y., had begun producing cellulosic ethanol. The demonstration facility, which was partially funded by the State of New York through the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, can run on a variety of biomass feedstocks including wood chips, tall grasses, corn stover (residual corn stalks) and sugar cane bagasse.

The N.Y. facility will provide process performance engineering data sufficient to support construction of 1/10th scale and commercial scale biorefineries in Kinross, Mich.

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