



Biofuels resource discussion kicks off WIN conferences

COEUR d'ALENE - Representatives from a smattering of industries gathered Tuesday at a biomass and alternative biofuel resources conference at North Idaho College, kicking off two weeks of industry specific conventions coordinated by Workforce Innovation Now.

"At this stage of the game, we are all just trying to say, who's doing what," said Hank Artis of Idaho TechConnect an organization that connects innovation with funding and technology.

"It worked better than I thought," said WIN Project Manager Vicki Isakson, who facilitated the video teleconference from NIC's Molstead Library.

Participants from Boundary and Shoshone counties, as well as Boise appeared via the video link hosted by NIC's eLearning department.

WIN is a Region One Department of Labor program organized to implement a five-part policy addressing employment and training assistance to dislocated workers.

In August 2008, the Idaho Department of Labor was awarded \$250,000 for workforce innovation from the National Emergency Grant (NEG).

In October, business leaders representing a wide range of industries from the five northern counties, convened for a three-hour workshop to discuss where and how to best utilize funds to stimulate the economy and create viable and sustainable growth. A recurring theme emerging from that meeting was the exigency for a highly trained and skilled workforce.

The upcoming WIN conferences stemmed from focus groups created at the October workshop.

While Tuesday's meeting wrapped up after just over an hour of the two-hour planned schedule, Vicki Isakson said she was happy with the discussion.

"What we decided as a partnership ... is that we want to include everybody who is interested in bio-mass in our information sharing," said Bob Swanby, economic development specialist for Region One at the Department of Commerce.

"Why we're having this discussion is because all these mills have closed," said Janet Bourque, a grant consultant representing Framing Our Community — a nonprofit organization in Elk City.

"Realistically the people who lost their job in a mill in Elk City or Bonners Ferry, they're not going to be moving to Seattle to do a manufacturing job ... What kind of retraining goes into this whole picture for those people who are place bound," Bourque asked the group to consider, noting that much of the conversation had focused on developing alternative Biofuel.

Isakson said funds from the federal grant were available to assist workers with retraining.

"The whole purpose of this grant is ... to create networks and ways to get people back to work quickly and retrained," she said.

Isakson said a priority throughout the region has been finding a way to create new jobs in the timber industry and continue to utilize the area's natural resource even with the poor economy. She contended that logging and sawmill skills would be transferable to the skill sets necessary in the bio-mass industry.

"Now things like this take a lot of time," said Isakson, adding the conference was on the right track.

Hank Artis agreed, saying the group had accomplished a lot. Members of the group will reconvene on Jan. 6 in Priest River for a summit meeting organized by Karl Dye, of the Bonner County Economic Development Corp. Artis described the timing of the events, "serendipitous."

"We accomplished our goal of figuring out what our next steps are, and getting a larger regional network," Isakson said.

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