

Biodiesel plant set up in drive towards clean fuel

Joint venture 'going nuts', rather than use palm oil

BY TANIA TAN

"GOING nuts" may well be the greener alternative to palm oil as a transport fuel. It will also not be at the expense of the crop's other uses, like cooking oil.

A joint venture biodiesel plant here, by Van Der Horst Biodiesel (VDH) and the Institute of Environmental Science and Engineering (IESE), will achieve this using the *Jatropha curcas* nut.

Because the non-food shrub can thrive on semi-arid soil, it has a major advantage over palm oil as it "does not compete with good agricultur-



MAJOR ADVANTAGE: The *Jatropha curcas* thrives on semi-arid soil, and does not need good agricultural land to grow.

al land", said Mr Peter Cheng, chief executive officer of the Singapore-based VDH.

Speaking at the signing of the joint venture yesterday, IESE director and chief executive officer Tay Joo Hwa said companies here are looking to-

wards taking full advantage of Singapore's renewed push for clean fuel.

Under the joint venture, two such clean-energy plants will be built. The first, a 4.5 hectare facility on Jurong Island, will be completed by De-

cember next year and will produce up to 200,000 metric tonnes of fuel.

Plans for the second plant, in Johor, are in the works.

Another four plants by other parties will be established here by next year, Professor Tay said, drawn by Singapore's "prime geo-political locale and excellent infrastructure".

He predicts that by the end of next year, Singapore will become one of the largest biodiesel production bases in Asia, churning out some 1.5 million tonnes annually.

Mr Cheng said biofuel produced by the Jurong plant will be sold directly to local oil companies, as well as those in Cambodia and China.

Already, buyers from Europe - the biggest user of green fuels - are expressing interest.

Each of the two joint venture plants will cost about

US\$40 million (S\$60.9 million), funded by VDH.

Besides using a more environmentally friendly plant source, the fuel will be cleaner on the production front as well.

Using technology developed at the institute, enzymes will replace chemicals in biofuel production, eliminating the need for high temperatures and pressures.

This major investment is "timely", said Prof Tay, as countries worldwide are beginning to shift their focus towards alternative energy sources.

Currently, biodiesel, derived from natural oils like palm and rapeseed, is converted into vehicle fuel through chemical processes. These are then blended with fossil fuels for petrol.

The European Union announced earlier this month that biodiesel will make up 10 per cent of transport fuel. Currently, less than 3 per cent is used.

Green fuel is not used in vehicles here, although oil company Shell plans to test its first biodiesel pump in the first half of this year.

"Alternative energy is the buzzword of today," said Mr Cheng. "We're happy that our plans contribute so perfectly to this cause."

taniat@sph.com.sg