

## SA seeks alternatives to supplement liquid fuels

By Margie Inggs

A spectrum of alternative energy sources was being considered to supplement the liquid fuels industry, including biodiesel and additives from commodities such as maize, soya beans and sugar cane, Mosibudi Mangena, the science and technology minister, said at the weekend.

Mangena said his department was also looking at alternative energies such as wind and gel, especially for poor people from informal settlements who relied on paraffin, which is dangerously flammable. "Gel burns extremely easily but is much safer as it doesn't tip over," he said.

It is made from commodities such as ethanol produced from sugar cane, as well as from maize and soya beans.

The need to investigate alternative energy sources has become more urgent with the dwindling global oil resources and sustained high oil prices.

Contrary to expectations, the price of crude oil has remained above \$50 a barrel for months and peaked at \$58.28 a barrel earlier this month.

Adrian Wynne, the deputy director of industrial affairs at SA Cane Growers, said the use of ethanol as an energy source had the potential to create many jobs in rural areas where sugar cane was produced but was still not commercially viable.

"However, this could change at any stage as a government decision to financially support ethanol production would swing the balance," he said.

"However, this is still tagged with a big question mark despite discussions during the past year between the sugar industry, government and petrol companies." He said maize was not a favoured option as a renewable energy source as the commodity was a staple food for millions of South Africans.

"On the other hand, 50 percent of the country's sugar crop is exported, so sugar could either be diverted from export or the total amount produced could be increased, depending on the price of ethanol," he said.

In Brazil, the government has supported ethanol production for the past 30 years since the crisis precipitated by the steep increase in the oil price in the 1970s, which drove South Africa to develop Sasol's oil-from-coal technology.

"Without government support, ethanol cannot compete with the price of petrol in any country, so governments have to weigh up the benefits to decide whether ethanol warrants their support," Wynne said. Benefits include the fact that ethanol is a renewable energy source which is less detrimental to the environment and creates local jobs.

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