The West Australian *2nd January 2008, 6:45 WST*

New fuel crop cuts the mustard

WA farmers will produce a new biodiesel crop this year as the emerging industry searches for a viable fuel that will flourish in drier parts of the Wheatbelt.

The oilseed crop Indian mustard will be processed at a Pingelly biodiesel plant that is expected to be operating by March.

The plant, a joint venture between a Pingelly farming family and BioWorks Australia, is expected to produce up to three million litres of biodiesel a year at full capacity using canola, mustard, tallow and imported palm oil.

Though canola has been seen as the biodiesel crop of choice in recent years in WA, researchers have long touted mustard as a better fuel crop in lower rainfall areas.

BioWorks has recognised the crop's potential and will have enough seed available for up to 10,000ha after a bulk-up program across nine WA farms last year.

Project manager Dan Evans said mustard sidestepped the "fuel versus food" debate over crops, which escalated because of soaring global grain and oilseed prices.

Mr Evans said mustard oil was only used in fuel production in Australia, it grew in areas not suited to canola and acted as a "break-crop" between cereal crop plantings to manage weeds and soil disease.

BioWorks is gathering data on how mustard planted across 550ha performed last year before determining the scale of planting programs this autumn.

The company is also supporting research by the University of WA and the Department of Agriculture and Food into improved plant breeds, including the development of herbicide-tolerant varieties.

Pingelly farmers John and Michelle Hassell will harvest their "six foot" mustard crop in coming weeks. The Hassells are directors of BioWorks Pingelly, a franchise of BioWorks Australia, which aims to set up the biodiesel plant in town with the long-term aim of allowing farmers to process their own crops at the plant.

Mr Hassell said that with the impending global shortage of crude oil, he saw a big future in biofuels production over the next decade.

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