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Agri-Tech, Kusters Zima deal to create 50 jobs in SC

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A new manufacturing partnership announced Monday between Agri-Tech Producers LLC of Columbia and Spartanburg-based Kusters Zima Corp. is expected to create up to 50 jobs in Spartanburg County.

Executives from both companies were joined by state and local officials at Kusters Zima's facility off Business 85 for the unveiling of the project.

Kusters Zima, a textile machinery manufacturer, will produce torrefaction equipment, which converts agricultural waste into a coal substitute or into a stronger feedstock.

Agri-Tech has been researching the technology since 2005 and recently secured an exclusive license to develop the system from North Carolina State University.

"We're very excited about our partnership with Kusters Zima," said Joe James, president and CEO of Agri-Tech. "Here you have a company that manufactured machinery for the textile sector -- it's no secret that sector has been on the decline -- and is now poised to work with us on a green initiative that is at the cutting edge."

Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed.

James said the first torrefaction units are scheduled to be in the market in about a year, and pre-production orders are now being taken.

In addition to the jobs created for the manufacture of the equipment, the company said several hundred additional jobs will be created by companies across the state that purchase the equipment.

Agri-Tech has been evaluating proposals for the past several months, narrowing the choices of manufacturing companies to three: a North Carolina company, a

Virginia company and Kusters Zima. James said Kusters Zima was the "clear choice."

"We are excited about being selected as Agri-Tech's partner and the opportunity this brings both (Kusters Zima) and our community," Ken Kruse, president and CEO of Kusters Zima, said in a statement. "Based upon their customer list, we could have as many as 50 new associates at full capacity."

Kusters Zima has about 80,000 square feet at its facility at 101 Zima Park Drive. Founded in 1994, its customer base primarily consisted of carpet manufacturers, Kusters Zima spokesman Gunter Knoll said.

The new machines the company will build for Agri-Tech produce a coal substitute that burns almost as efficiently, but is renewable and produces less carbon dioxide.

James said the products have received interest from every major utility company in the state.

Feedstock pellets produced by the system also are more efficient, he said.

The technology has garnered more attention recently since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said emissions from cows, including belches and other gassy releases, are responsible for almost 18 percent of the methane gas that escapes into the atmosphere. Methane gas is one of the major greenhouse gases contributing to climate change.

Since the pellets produced by Agri-Tech's system are made from agricultural waste, such as wood chips, grass and leaves, rather than harsh chemicals that are typically used in feedstock, James said it should cut down on greenhouse gases produced by cattle that eat it.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for South Carolina," said Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C. "Kusters Zima and Agri-Tech are creating jobs and investment, while moving forward with clean energy technology. I'm very excited to be here. It's something that really ought to be celebrated."

Shelley Robbins, project coordinator of the Spartanburg office of Upstate Forever, which advocates for sensible growth and conservation in the Upstate, said her organization was pleased with the project.

"This is great," she said. "Our goal is to improve the way we use our resources. This technology is a great example of that, and we want to see more of it."



