

Published on HamptonRoads.com | PilotOnline.com (<http://hamptonroads.com>)

Suffolk facility to turn sewage into fertilizer is christened

SUFFOLK

Environmental lawyer and activist Bobby Kennedy Jr. helped christen a \$5 million facility Thursday on the James River that will convert sewage waste into tons of eco-friendly fertilizer.

Kennedy, the son of former U.S. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, is a board member of Ostara, a Canadian company that developed the green technology behind the new fertilizer center, built on the grounds of the Nansemond sewage treatment plant in Suffolk.

To be operated in partnership with the Hampton Roads Sanitation District, the facility is the first of its kind on the East Coast and the second in the United States. The inaugural center opened a year ago in Oregon.

Kennedy, in a blue suit and a tie decorated with fish, joked that he has sued more than 300 faulty sewage plants during his legal career with the Waterkeeper Alliance and the Natural Resources Defense Council. It was his frustration with polluting sewage plants that drew him to Ostara, he said.

"I approached them about being on their board, I was so taken with what they were doing," Kennedy told a crowd of about 100 workers, Sanitation District officials and local political leaders at a packed ceremony. "So now, instead of me calling mayors to tell them I'm about to sue them, I call to tell them I can help them fix their sewage plants, save them some money and do the right thing for the environment."

Among other ventures, Kennedy looks for green companies to invest in and expand. He gets about five or six letters a day from startup companies looking for cash, he said, and so far he has sunk his teeth into firms focused on solar energy and electric cars and one group trying to make plastic from algae.

"The technology out there is extraordinary," he said. "We are truly on the edge of a green-technology revolution."

Ostara is part of this historic shift, Kennedy said. The company, just 5 years old, addresses a bedeviling problem among many sewage plants around the world - struvite, a rock like crystal, that builds up on the walls of sewage pipes handling high amounts of nutrients, especially phosphorus.

Excessive nutrients are major pollutants in the Chesapeake Bay. The Sanitation District 's Nansemond plant takes in the phosphorus-rich wastes from Smithfield Foods, among other customers, before releasing treated effluent into the James River and, ultimately, the Bay.

Struvite acts like cholesterol that clogs human arteries - slowly constricting the flow of blood, or sewage in the case of the Sanitation District. Ostara's technology breaks down struvite and collects excess nutrients, then transforms them into a recycled byproduct - a slow-releasing fertilizer called Crystal Green.

Ted Henifin, the district's executive director, said the new process will not really lessen the amount of nutrients that flow from the Nansemond plant into the Bay. Still, he said, it will help the plant perform better and will create a needed product from material that, until now, the district had burned as waste in an incinerator.

The Sanitation District signed a contract to build the facility last November. Construction began in January. It opened about three weeks ago but was christened in style on Thursday.

Crystal Green looks like tiny, white beads of candy. It can withstand rainfall and hot temperatures without releasing its nutrients too fast - a key quality when trying to control polluted runoff from lawns, gardens, turf farms and golf courses.

The slow-release fertilizer is being sold locally for residential use at White's Garden Center in Chesapeake. Commercially, for bigger jobs, Crystal Green mixes are being sold by fertilizer giant Southern States, officials said.

Scott Harper, (757) 446-2340, scott.harper@pilotonline.com

Source URL (retrieved on 06/01/2010 - 23:41): <http://hamptonroads.com/2010/05/suffolk-facility-turn-sewage-fertilizer-christened>