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GM could save the day for future fuels



FOR a long time now the doomsayers have been telling us we are about to run out of oil – at least since the 1970s. Now, with the world financial crisis, its price is actually dropping.

As mankind moved beyond the stone age before running out of stones, I suspect we will move beyond the oil age before running out of oil.

Recently Royal Dutch Shell backed next generation biofuels with an expanded agreement with Codex.

The new agreement with Shell is about fast-tracking development of technology to convert lignocelluloses – the stalk of corn plants, wheat straw, mallee crops, the timber residues – into ethanol.

It is about “better enzymes” to improve efficiency, according to Graeme Sweeney, Shell executive, future fuels.

Shell has invested significantly in various alternative energies, but according to recent reports it's going to dump wind, solar and hydro power in favour of this research into biofuels.

If the research becomes a reality there could be real opportunities

for Australian agriculture which produces as much as 40 million tonnes of stubble each year.

First generation biofuels that convert crops such as corn, canola and sugarcane into ethanol are controversial because they pit food-needs against fuel production.

Stubble would seem a less controversial fuel source – though it is of course highly valued as part of many minimum tillage agricultural systems.

There is another potential issue: genetic modification (GM) may be involved in the development of the new technology.

In the past 10 years the anti-GM lobby has been quite successful in Australia with bans on GM canola only recently lifted in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia.

The anti-GM Greenpeace campaign continues with a couple of Americans lecturing grain growers in recent weeks about why they shouldn't plant a crop North American farmers have been growing for some time.

If Australian agriculture is to not be left behind, the industry will perhaps need to be more embracing of new technologies in the future and start shedding some of its doomsayer hangers-on.

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