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Funding axed, N.C. Biofuels Center to close

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The N.C. Biofuels Center will shut down “within weeks,” a spokesman said Tuesday morning as lawmakers moved to vote on a state budget that cuts off its \$2 million in annual state funding.

The center, near Oxford, conducts research mainly on transportation fuels derived from cellulosic grasses and other crops. It also aims to facilitate local investment by out-of-state biofuels companies.

It employs 14 people, spokesman Wil Glenn said Tuesday. It’s a nominally independent nonprofit corporation, but its budget has come almost entirely from annual appropriations by the N.C. General Assembly.

It’s not immediately clear what will become of its commercial building on Hillsboro Street, just west of downtown Oxford. The organization has been leasing the building from the N.C. Department of Agriculture for \$1 a year, Glenn said.

A provision of the state budget would fund five new positions to conduct biofuels research at the Agriculture Department, said Anne Tazewell, who leads the Clean Transportation Program at the N.C. Solar Center, a division within N.C. State University.

Tazewell recalled Clean Burn Fuels, which failed in 2011 after building an ethanol plant in Raeford with \$66 million in loans from banks and local investors.


“We’ve had a pretty challenging past in North Carolina,” Tazewell said.


A chemical company still expects to keep moving forward with its plans to build a \$200 million ethanol plant in Sampson County, however. The company, Wilmington-based Chemtex International, has begun to nail down agreements for farmers down east to supply the plant with the crops it will need to produce up to 20 million gallons of ethanol annually.


“While they don’t want to downplay the help the NC Biofuels Center provided in getting (the plant) to where it is, the project is at a point where it will go forward regardless,” company spokesman Charlie Harper said after speaking to Chemtex managers.

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