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Ericsson, Idea Cellular and GSMA launch live biofuel base stations in India

Earlier we discussed how mobile phone use is skyrocketing in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions and how biofuels help make rural areas active participants of the era of fast and mobile communications. Mobile telephony drives social change and can transform agriculture, small businesses, micro-trade and grassroots politics for the better. Biofuels allow the technology to become available to the rural poor (earlier posts).

Indian mobile operator Idea Cellular, Ericsson and the GSM Association’s Development Fund today announced that four mobile base stations powered by locally produced biofuels have extended Idea’s commercial mobile network in rural India. All four locations in the state of Maharashtra are greenfield sites that have not previously had access to a mobile network and are located in areas with unreliable power supply.

“The use of biofuels is helping us to bring the social and economical benefits that access to communication bring to rural communities in India.” - Sanjeev Aga, Managing Director, IDEA Cellular.

The live mobile base stations follow the initial feasibility assessment of different sources of oil for biodiesel production and establishment of a local supply chain (earlier post).

Fish oil

Biodiesel has several advantages over conventional diesel as a power source for base stations. An important factor is that it is produced locally, creating employment in rural areas while reducing the need for transportation. Biodiesel has a much lower impact on the environment than conventional diesel. The cleaner burning renewable fuel also requires fewer site visits and also extends the life of the base station generator, reducing operator costs.

The biodiesel for the base stations initially comes from fish oil and waste vegetable oil - essentially used-frying oils from local restaurants. In the long term, locally produced jatropha oil will be used. The selected sources for biodiesel have low environmental impact and follow responsible environmental practices for biodiesel production:
Bioenergy pact between Europe and Africa


Super Ethanol E85 from its own brand and Dyneff brand filling stations in France. It is building a 2500 ton/month, €13.5/US$18 million biodiesel facility at its Petromidia refinery.


★ San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E), a utility serving 3.4 million customers, announced it has signed a supply contract with Envirepel Energy, Inc. for renewable biomass energy that will be online by October 2007. Bioenergy is part of a 300MW fraction of SDG&E’s portfolio of renewable resources. San Diego Gas & Electric - June 13, 2007.

★ Cycleenergy, an Austrian bioenergy group, closed €6.7 million in equity financing for expansion of its biomass and biogas power plant activities in Central and Eastern Europe. The company is currently completing construction of a 5.5 MW (nominal) woodchip fired biomass facility in northern Austria and has a total of over 150 MW of biomass and biogas combined heat and power (CHP) projects across Central Europe in the pipeline. Cycleenergy Biopower [*.pdf] - June 12, 2007.

★ The government of Taiwan unveils its plan to promote green energy, with all government vehicles in Taipei switching to E3 ethanol gasoline by September and biofuel expected to be available at all gas stations nationwide by 2011. Taipei Times - June 12, 2007.

★ A large-scale biogas production project is on scheme in Vienna. 17,000 tonnes of organic municipal waste will be converted into biogas that will save up to 3000 tonnes of CO2. 1.7 million cubic meters of biogas will be generated that will be converted into 11,200 MWh of electricity per year in a CHP plant, the heat of which will be used

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Tom Phillips, Chief Government and Regulatory Affairs Officer of the GSMA, the global trade association for mobile operators, says: “Exploring alternative power solutions, such as biofuels, is key to the development of cost-effective ways to extend mobile networks to the 20% of the world’s population that don’t have coverage today.”

Mats Granryd, President of Ericsson India, says: “Solutions to solve the power challenges associated with expanding rural coverage will help operators reach people beyond the electricity grid. We are pleased to pioneer biofuel into the telecom industry.”

The Indian government is encouraging local companies to adopt biofuels, so Idea Cellular is in the position of becoming a leading exponent of this alternative power source.

GSMA Development Fund

The GSMA’s Development Fund was set up in October 2005 to catalyse the role of mobile technology in social, economic and environmental development. Working with the mobile industry, the development community and governments, the Fund seeks to identify innovative ideas for development that are scalable and sustainable on a global level. By focusing on practical implementation, the Development Fund and its partners create unique knowledge and experience of the role and potential of mobile technology in development.

The GSM Association (GSMA) is the global trade association representing 700 GSM mobile phone operators across 217 countries of the world. In addition, more than 180 manufacturers and suppliers support the Association’s initiatives as key partners.

The primary goals of the GSMA are to ensure mobile phones and wireless services work globally and are easily accessible, enhancing their value to individual customers and national economies, while creating new business opportunities for operators and their suppliers. The Association’s members serve more than two billion customers - 82 percent of the world’s mobile phone users.

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