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JOil makes biofuels feedstock breakthrough

By RONNIE LIM

THE first-ever commercially produced *Jatropha curcas* plants through Singapore-developed tissue culture will be ready for markets in India and other regions like East Africa and South-east Asia by the middle of next year.

Announcing the breakthrough, Singapore-based JOil, a Temasek-Tata venture, said it has contracted India's largest plant biotech company KF Bioplants (KFB) to produce and deliver an initial one million *Jatropha* plants which are used as a renewable biofuels feedstock. JOil, which announced the deal on Monday, declined to give the contract value. KFB will take about eight months to grow the elite *Jatropha curcas* plants from tissue cultures obtained from mother plants developed by JOil, and the first deliveries to market will be in June 2011.

JOil's initial contract with KFB - covering delivery of one million plants for 18 months - has an option for extension covering production of five million plants for 3-5 years, a spokeswoman told BT.

The initial market for the *Jatropha* plants will be India, although JOil is also targeting the Philippines and Thailand - where it recently appointed Toyota Tsusho Corp as its sales representative, and with which it is also working to set up nurseries and tissue culture facilities there.

Another target market is Kenya and Mozambique in East Africa, through partner Tata Chemicals, the JOil spokeswoman said. 'Though a few success stories of lab-scale tissue culture regeneration of *Jatropha curcas* have been reported, none of them proved to be commercially viable as *Jatropha* is one of the plants not amenable to such techniques,' JOil said of its breakthrough.

With strong scientific back-up from Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory, JOil successfully developed a protocol which enables the production of millions of true-to-type clones through tissue culture, it added. This was earlier tested on a small scale at KFB and other international tissue culture facilities, and is being taken to initial commercial production now with KFB.

S Ramachandran, JOil's GM of production and technology, said: 'We are happy to see the progress of our tissue culture protocol with KFB as we have overcome the majority of the *Jatropha* tissue culture challenges. With an experienced and renowned partner like KFB, I have no doubt we can produce and market large volumes.'

Jatropha is a plant often touted as an alternative to palm oil as feedstock for biodiesel. When palm oil prices shot up at one stage, Australian biodiesel maker Natural Fuel, for instance, looked to buying *jatropha* from Madagascar as a replacement feedstock for its previous Singapore plant. Currently, Singapore's biggest biofuel investor is Finland's Neste Oil, whose \$1.2 billion renewable-diesel Tuas plant is set to start operations by year-end.

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