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Move Over Cotton, There's a New Fiber in the Delta - Big, Bad Bamboo

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Moso bamboo is what most bamboo products are made of. There are no commercial farms in the country that grow it, but some business leaders in the Delta hope to change that.

Community leaders are hoping a fiber other than cotton will bring jobs to the Delta. MPB's Cari Gervin has the details on what could be the state's newest cash crop – bamboo.

Hundreds of years ago, the fertile land down by the Mississippi River had thickets of bamboo. Now, you're hard pressed to find any.

Ed Johnson wants to change that.

“We are the first in the country – the first outside of Asia – to do something like this. We have an opportunity that nobody else has right now.”

Johnson runs the Delta Economic Development Center in Washington County. He wants the country's first commercial bamboo farms to be in Mississippi.

“We think it would represent millions in tax revenue and thousands of jobs.”

Until lately it wasn't possible to farm bamboo. Everything bamboo that you see in stores today is made from old-growth forests in Asia. Jackie Heinricher is the CEO of Booshoot, a Washington state company that has developed the technology that makes bamboo farming doable.

“The Delta is the best place to grown this particular bamboo called Moso. And it is the plant utilized in China to produce the thousands of products we are currently importing.”

Products like bamboo flooring, which has had sales grow even during the recession. David Knight is the president of Teragren, a Seattle company that produces some of that flooring – in a

factory in China. He says he would love to have an American plant, and he really wants it to be in Greenville.

“Bamboo growing in the United States to be manufactured into various products will happen. There are groups forming in other parts of the country that have the same vision, but the Delta’s further ahead.”

Knight is one of several manufacturers that have tentatively committed to grow the bamboo industry in the Delta – assuming farmers also commit to growing bamboo.

And there lies the problem – it can take six years for a bamboo crop to reach maturity. So that’s six years of farmland that isn’t producing income. There is the option to sell carbon-offset credits to manufacturers – bamboo stores more carbon than trees.

But some farmers are just willing to take a risk on something new. Bamboo needs no pesticides and little irrigation, making it an environmentally friendly crop.

Ed Johnson says that a couple of farmers have tentatively committed upwards of 5,000 acres to grow bamboo. But it will be next spring before any shoots of the new industry materialize.

For MPB News, I’m Cari Gervin.