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### There's gold in them corn fields

By Amy Bickel

LYONS - There's a gold rush in Rice County. At least, there is in GERAL SCHMIDT'S farm fields.

Corn stretches across acres where soybeans once grew - head-high from this summer's rainfall. It brings optimism on the heels of a poor wheat harvest, but that is just the beginning.

Prices are soaring for the commodity growing here and across the nation, thanks to the country's demand for ethanol.

But the ethanol boom's impact is evident in more than just more acres of corn. Down the road, midway between Sterling and Lyons, crews work on a plant that will churn out fuel from crops like corn and milo.

Schmidt calls it the potential to save farm country, the potential to allow the farm to pass from generation to generation and a way to keep the area viable.

"I've traveled through small communities for more than 50 years," he said of his days as a custom harvester. "And I've watched these towns dry up. I've watched the progression of closing business from Texas to Montana.

"I feel our county will be able to hold its own."

Schmidt is one of about 120 investors in **Kansas Ethanol LLC**, an idea that was tossed around for the past couple of years before construction began in December.

The plant that will produce 55 million gallons a year is one of six under construction in Kansas at present, according to the Kansas Corn Commission. Another dozen or so plants also are in the works.

Rice County's plant should go online by March, said Mike Chisam, the plant's general manager.

Crews are finishing concrete work. They also have constructed the first of three grain silos.

The plant will use 20 million bushels of grain, most of it coming from a 10-county area, Chisam said.

"We can get most of our grain from the region, which is a good thing for the farmers," he said.

Excited over the high prices and the promise of turning crops into fuel, American farmers this spring planted 92.9 million acres to corn, according to the Kansas Agriculture Statistics Service. That's up about 20 percent from 2006, and if realized, it would be the most acreage since 1944, when American farmers responded to huge demand amid World War II.

In Kansas, farmers planted 3.6 million acres, the highest since 1943.

However, farmers aren't the only ones benefiting, said Jill Nichols, Rice County economic development director. The plant will add about 35 jobs to the county workforce. Also, a few ideas are in the works for companies directly involved in biofuels production.

Nichols is tightlipped on one proposed business. Another proposal is a possible biodiesel plant near Bushton. Area residents met with a national biodiesel company last week about the idea.

It's just part of the plan to get people to move to Rice County, she said. Lyons and Sterling have new housing developments. Nichols said she also was working with Little River on a golf course development.

"We have good schools, great parks," she said. "So many things are happening here."

For now, the cost of corn has Chisam watching the markets closely, he said, noting the higher prices will have an effect on the plant.

It also means increased feeding costs for ranchers, Rice County farmer and feedlot owner Kenny Knight said. Nevertheless, he remains optimistic.

"It would have cost us more if we built this plant or not," he said, noting he'll utilize the ethanol byproduct distiller's grain to help feed his cattle.

"There is no doubt about it," he said. "Any time you can bring 35 or 40 jobs directly into the community, and they are all pretty good paying jobs, that has to be a good benefit."