

Forum will discuss local biodiesel effort

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IF YOU GO

■ **WHAT:** Display of cars run on biodiesel and public forum with speakers from Washington State University, University of Idaho and the Spokane County Conservation District

■ **WHERE:** Palouse Discovery Science Center, 2371 N.E. Hopkins Court in Pullman, near Schweitzer Engineering Labs

■ **WHEN:** 6:30 p.m. today, car display and light refreshments, followed by the forum from 7 to 9 p.m.

■ **COST:** Free

University of Idaho, where it powers two pickup trucks and one Volkswagen Beetle, all of which run on 100 percent biodiesel fuel. The Vandal Trolley, used for special events, runs on a blend of 20 percent biodiesel and 80 percent petroleum diesel.

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With record high prices of gasoline and diesel hitting motorists across the Palouse, it's no wonder that some people are attracted to the idea of growing their own fuel.

As the know-how and technology of the alternative fuel called biodiesel continues to evolve, the possibility of producing economic biodiesel may become a reality.

A public forum tonight at the Palouse Discovery Science Center in Pullman, with speakers from the University of Idaho and Washington State University, will highlight local programs involved with biodiesel.

"Last year we grew 22 acres of mustard. We pressed the seeds for the oils and we'll be making biodiesel from that this spring to run my 1981 Mercedes," local organic farmer Mary Jane Butters said.

Biodiesel is in use at the

Biodiesel

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said Joe Thompson of the UI's department of biological and agricultural engineering.

"We could run the trolley on 100 percent biodiesel if we had more of the fuel available," he said.

The UI biodiesel program extracts oil from mustard seed, just as Butters expects to do. The fuel at the UI is mostly made from the oil in 500-gallon batches over a three-day period, although the university is now experimenting with a continuous production process.

Soybeans can be used as an oil source for biodiesel, as can waste fats from restaurants and rendering plants. Although there is no local gas station that sells biodiesel to the public in the Moscow-Pullman area, there is one in Spokane, Thompson said.

But there's more to biodiesel than just an interest in alternative energy.

Dennis Roe, of WSU's crop and soil sciences, will be at tonight's forum because of his interest in the oilseed crops from the point of view of conserving soil and controlling weeds.

"There are real benefits in having canola or mustard in a crop-rotation system, one year in four or five years. In fact, outside of Colfax, there are some farmers doing canola every other year with winter wheat," Roe said.

The oilseed crops have a tap root that penetrates the subsoil and allows more moisture to soak into the ground. And during the year that the oil seed crops are in the field, grassy weeds can more easily be controlled because a wider spectrum of chemicals can be used against them than when wheat

BIODIESEL: THE PROS AND CONS

ADVANTAGES OF BIODIESEL

■ It can be produced locally from agricultural products and waste cooking oil.

■ It burns without sulfate emissions, with fewer unburned hydrocarbons and with less carbon monoxide.

■ It can be used in vehicles with diesel engines produced after 1994. Pre-1994 engines may contain natural rubber components that biodiesel can dissolve. Some pre-1994 engines may be rubber-free, depending on the vehicle.

■ One type of mustard plant researched at the UI has seeds that can be pressed for oils and the residual plant matter shows potential as an organic pesticide product.

Source: National Biodiesel Board and Mary Jane Butters

DISADVANTAGES OF BIODIESEL

■ It will only supply a small amount of the diesel used in the United States. The long-haul trucking industry uses more diesel fuel than vegetable oils can ever supply.

■ Its price could be more stable than petroleum diesel, but its price (without government subsidy) will be much higher than what the U.S. economy is used to from petroleum-based diesel.

Source: Geologist Ken Deffeyes of Princeton University

is present, Roe said.

Butters emphasized that biodiesel could help make local farmers more energy independent.

"It's liberating to think that I can grow my own fuel, or at least part of it. Something like in the old days when farmers had a wood lot where they were growing their own firewood," she said.

Geologists have a different concern for alternative fuels as the worldwide production of petroleum has reached its peak and begun to decline.

"The figures indicate that world oil production will have peaked around 2000 to 2003," said retired petroleum geologist Ken Deffeyes of Princeton University. "It looks like the world is now, or will soon be, on the downhill side of the petroleum era."

As supplies decrease, prices can be expected to both rise and to spike upward from time to

time. A particularly cold winter in the Northeast or further trouble in the Middle East, for example, will mean a rapid movement upward in prices, Deffeyes said.

"It's part of what economists call 'queuing theory.' As supply reaches its maximum, and demand is eating up all that supply, you either have nobody waiting in line (for fuel) or else everybody is lined up for it," Deffeyes said. "I like to say that the good news is that Saudi Arabia is no longer controlling the world price of oil. But the bad news is that nobody is controlling the price of oil."

Because biodiesel is not derived from petroleum, it is insulated from the coming decline in world petroleum production. Although the price of biodiesel is relatively high, it may become cheaper relative to petroleum diesel and its price also may be more constant, Deffeyes said.

But Deffeyes added that biodiesel is a drop in the proverbial bucket of fuel demand.

"Biodiesel can't compete with regular (petroleum) diesel in terms of volume," he said. "It's just on a different scale altogether. The demand for diesel for trucking and industrial use for diesel could not be met even if farmers everywhere were producing biodiesel."

Butters said she isn't concerned about the big picture.

"I'm interested in producing fuel for my farm, I'm not going to worry about what the whole world needs," she said.