



Photo courtesy of Dave Clark/Snohomish County Business Journal

Merritt Wolfkill operates the seed-drying equipment at his feedstock processing plant near Monroe.

Wolfkill links up with farmers, county on biodiesel operation

by Charles Henry Thomas

For the last 70 years, Wolfkill Feed and Fertilizer has specialized in animal feed and agriculture fertilizer. Today, the fourth-generation family-owned business has operations in Monroe, Stanwood, Moses Lake and Othello and is venturing into biodiesel by developing feedstock for Whole Energy's refinery in Anacortes.

The notion started in 2005, when Dale Reiner, who farms 400 acres near Monroe, planted test crops of 18 different varieties of canola that produced remarkably high yields. At the time, there was no canola in western Washington and no infrastructure to support oil-seed crops, which had to be trucked to eastern Washington to be dried and crushed. The company built a seed crusher and processing plant adjacent to a county landfill and uses the methane from the old garbage dump to process the oil-rich mash.

AWB board member Merritt Wolfkill, the company's president, great grandson and grandson of the company's founders, struck a deal with Snohomish County to provide the new facility for the area's burgeoning canola, sunflower and mustard seed production. Farmers, many of whom were Wolfkill's customers, were searching for a new cash crop.

Wolfkill helps local farmers

Local farmers are in the midst of harvesting 400 acres of canola that will be processed at the new facility. Other seed crops, such as sunflower and mustard, could also be processed in the future as farmers rotate crops and adjust to market demands. By 2014, the county hopes to increase the yield to 4,000 acres, and to power all of its diesel fleet on the locally grown biodiesel, according to Lynn Thompson, a reporter for *The Seattle Times* who covered the plant's dedication on Sept. 23.

In the Midwest, there are feed mills, grain elevators and transportation systems "everywhere," said Matt Bachleda, of Wolfkill Feed and Fertilizer. The challenge for Snohomish County was to develop that infrastructure and still make the production profitable.

The new facility represents a partnership among the state, county and federal governments at a time when the nation is searching for alternatives to foreign oil.

"There is no single fuel out there that is going to swoop down like some kind of superhero and save the day," said Jenna Higgins Rose, of the National Biodiesel Board.

But in a recent article in *The Seattle Times* she said the 175 biodiesel plants nationwide are adding "badly needed capacity to our energy supply." And because biodiesel can be used interchangeably with petroleum diesel, it represents an "immediate part of the solution."

Government partnership makes project possible

Government provided the initial funding to launch the industry. For example, state energy officials handed the county with a check for \$500,000 from the state Energy Freedom Fund to pay for the new seed crusher. Another \$500,000 in county money helped launch pilot-seed plantings and purchase the silos and seed dryer, and \$344,400 in federal money also helped develop the facility.

The seed oil will be refined into biodiesel at Whole Energy in Anacortes and returned to the county. Snohomish County now uses 120,000 gallons of a 20-80 biodiesel-petroleum blend to fuel about 30 percent of its fleet, said Deanna Carveth, county project specialist.

The news is not all good for Washington and the biodiesel producers. The commercial biofuels industry has suffered this year after the cost of raw materials shot up dramatically. Imperium Renewables, whose Grays Harbor biodiesel plant is the region's largest, laid off many employees and is exporting much of its output to Europe, where prices for biodiesel are higher.

Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon is concerned about the county's shrinking agriculture base. Roughly 60,000 acres are farmland, but the acreage had dropped "precipitously" by 2004. Family farms, particularly dairies, were being sold to housing developers. He and other members of the county council see biodiesel as a way to keep agriculture lands in crop production.

The key will for the future will be to see if the price of biodiesel will get to the point where the industry can stand on its own two feet and allow family farms to churn a profit. Otherwise, the shrinkage will likely continue once the housing markets catches fire again. ■

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Ms. Marian McDermott
Ch2M Hill
1100 112th Ave NE Ste 400
Bellevue WA 98004-4511

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