

Going green

An Edmonds service station is now pumping biodiesel fuel

*By Sue Waldburger
Enterprise writer*

Now there is one less reason for environmentally conscious residents in south Snohomish County to claim it's hard being green.

Drivers who favor renewable domestic fuel over gasoline and regular diesel products now are able to fill their vehicles in Edmonds with biodiesel fuel.

This month a pump dispensing B20 -- a mix of 80 percent petroleum and 20 percent agriculture-based biodiesel fuel -- opened at Woodway Gas Mart, 23726 100th Ave. W. It's the only retail biodiesel outlet between the University District and Ballard in Seattle and the cities of Snohomish and Marysville, according to Kevin Kuper of alternative-fuels supplier Whole Energy of Mount Vernon.

The price per gallon of biodiesel at Woodway Gas Mart was \$3.05 as of last Tuesday. Regular gas was \$2.69 a gallon and premium, \$2.95. The station does not sell regular diesel, but a nearby service station advertised it for \$3.09 a gallon.

The narrowing of the price gap between regular diesel and biodiesel came, according to Kuper, with the increase in foreign oil prices and progress the biofuels industry has made in producing an increasingly effective and affordable product.

Jin Kim, who bought the longtime service station on the cusp of Woodway a year ago, said demand for his biodiesel is growing. Customers, he noted, "are quite happy it's here."

He said he conducted research on biodiesel via the Internet and decided to carry it because he "heard it's more friendly to the environment." The Internet search eventually led to his relationship with Whole Energy and Kuper. Kuper, 29, expresses optimism that this is only the beginning of a bright future for biodiesel -- and the environment in general -- in Washington state.

The passage last November of the Renewable Fuel Standard law that requires 2 percent of all diesel sold in the state to be bio-based by January of 2008 helps by establishing a market for the alternative fuel, Kuper noted. So does recognition by the agriculture community in Washington that growing canola seed, mustard seed and other plants for fuel makes economic sense, he continued.

Biodiesel can be used in ignition-compression vehicles (on-road, marine and rail) without modification, Kuper said. Home-heating systems also can use it.

It's touted as more clean burning than petroleum diesel and less harmful if spilled.

The percentage of vehicles in the U.S. powered by biofuels (including ethanol) is small, admits Kuper, an Edmonds resident who graduated from Meadowdale High School in

1995. It's unknown how many vehicles in Snohomish County are powered by biodiesel.

Recently the city of Edmonds switched all its diesel trucks -- with the exception of the aid cars -- to biodiesel fuel, reported Noel Miller, director of public works. The cost difference between biodiesel and regular diesel fuel no longer is significant, he said.

The Port of Edmonds is constantly evaluating the pros and cons of offering biodiesel to marina customers as well as for the Port's own equipment, said Marla Kempf, Port deputy director. "New products carry some hesitation," Kempf noted, adding that big delivery minimums and uncertainty as to demand among boaters are among the Port's concerns.

But, Kempf noted, "It's just a matter of time (before biodiesel is used by the Port). There definitely is a future for it."

Kuper said he is also talking with the Edmonds School District about transitioning its buses to the renewable fuel.

Both Kempf and Miller admitted concern with biodiesel's reputation for clogging fuel filters. That's the reason, Miller said, biodiesel is not used in the city's aid cars, which must be at the ready at all times.

Kuper, who said his aging Mercedes runs very well on biodiesel, claims clogging "is an education issue." It also is related "to percentage blend. We see older vehicles with lots of carbon build-up" that have problems at the on-set, he explained.

But, insists Kuper, "once you start running BD (biodiesel), you see the 'BD enema effect'" as the fuel begins to "clean out, push out gunk" from the fuel system.

"Once you've made it through the 'enema stage,' the engine will run better," he declared.

Another down side of biodiesel is that the purer (less diesel petroleum added) it is, the more likely it is to "cloud" or even turn gel-like in very-cold temperatures and thus become unusable in vehicles, Kuper said. That's why, he continued, blending in biodiesel at lower levels makes more sense in cold-weather climates.

The up side? Whole Energy Fuels sees biofuels as an antidote to the consequences of declining oil reserves, global warming, health concerns and national security issues. They also, Kuper said, have the potential of helping breathe new life into Washington's economy.

And then there's the matter of the smell emanating from biodiesel-burning vehicles. Some describe it as essence of French fries. Others liken it to steak.

Proponents say whatever your take on the odor, it's enough to make you hungry for greens.