

Snohomish County dedicates new biodiesel facility

Snohomish County officials Tuesday dedicated a new facility to store, dry and crush seed oil that will be refined locally into biodiesel and used to power county vehicles. Although it's a small project, officials say it creates a new cash crop for struggling farmers and a clean, renewable fuel source for the county.

By [Lynn Thompson](#)

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SNOHOMISH — Six silver silos are the face of energy independence in Snohomish County.

County officials Tuesday dedicated a new facility to store, dry and crush locally grown seed that will be refined into biodiesel and used to power county vehicles. Although it's a small project, officials say it creates a new cash crop for struggling farmers and a clean, renewable fuel source for the county.

Even the power to run the new dryer and soon-to-be-purchased crusher comes from a local source — methane gas from the adjacent former county landfill on Cathcart Way near Highway 9.

"This is a model for the whole United States in terms of growing our own energy," said Snohomish County Council Chairman Dave Somers.

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.

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 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."

However, 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, has laid off many employees and is exporting much of its output to Europe, where prices for biodiesel are higher.

State energy officials at Tuesday's dedication presented the county with a ceremonial 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 diesel blend to fuel about 30 percent of its fleet, said Deanna Carveth, county project specialist.

About 60,000 acres in Snohomish County are farmland, but County Executive Aaron Reardon said the acreage had dropped "precipitously" by 2004. Family farms, particularly dairies, were being sold to housing developers.

"To make farmers prosperous, we had to make farming profitable," Reardon said.

At the same time, farmers were searching for new cash crops.

Dale Reiner, who farms 400 acres near Monroe, planted test crops that year of 18 different varieties of canola. Reiner said there was no canola growing in Western Washington at the time, and farmers didn't know what to expect. He said the canola produced remarkably high yields.

But another problem arose. There was no infrastructure to support oil-seed crops, which had to be trucked to Eastern Washington to be dried and crushed.

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, he said, was to develop that infrastructure and still make the production profitable.

Merritt Wolfkill, the company's president, praised the government for working with the agricultural community.

"To see politicians get behind agriculture is exciting," he said.

His company will run the seed-crushing operation in partnership with the county. After the seed is dried and crushed at the Snohomish County facility, his company will truck the seed oil to Anacortes and sell the oil-rich plant mash that remains after crushing to farmers for livestock feed.

State officials said the Snohomish County project could serve as a model for creating new markets for agriculture, developing alternatives to fossil fuels, and preserving farmland.

"This is one of the most exciting projects in the state because it's a county working closely with its agricultural community to grow something besides houses," said Peter Moulton, the state's bioenergy coordinator.

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