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Ferndale runs school buses on biodiesel; School district first in county to try blended fuel

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FERNDALE - Students have been breathing a little easier since November, when **school buses** started running on 20 percent soybean power.

The **Ferndale School** District is the first in Whatcom County to switch its **buses** to B20 - a fuel blend of 80 percent petroleum diesel and 20 percent biodiesel - in an effort to reduce emissions that are harmful to young respiratory systems and the environment.

"We're doing a lot less polluting with it," said Darrell Clute, **Ferndale School** District director of transportation. "We're trying to be proactive about it."

Like other districts in the region, **Ferndale** already had taken advantage of grants from the Northwest Clean Air Agency to upgrade some of its older **buses** to **run** more cleanly by installing catalytic converters and exhaust filters.

The district is getting a portion of the same grant to make up the cost difference between petroleum diesel and biodiesel. The 35 to 40 **buses** burn about 70,000 gallons of fuel a year, Clute said. Prices fluctuate, but the Clean Air Agency grant will contribute around \$8,400 to about \$217,000 the district budgeted for fuel during the 2006-07 **school** year.

The Clean Air Agency received part of a one-time \$600,000 federal grant that it distributed for **bus** upgrades. Since 2003, the agency has received about \$100,000 a year in state funding for **bus** upgrades in the region. Up to 15 percent of the money can be used for other projects related to the reduction of diesel emissions, such as subsidizing biodiesel costs, said agency director Mark Asmundson.

Other districts are watching **Ferndale** to see how the **buses** perform and how the bottom line is affected.

"I feel like sometimes it takes a while to perfect," said Lynden transportation supervisor Roger Gates. "I think it's great **Ferndale's** doing it and is willing to step forward, but if there's any adverse affect, you don't want to be part of that typically."

Unlike **Ferndale**, some districts don't have their own fuel tanks onsite, which means they would have to find a local supplier that carries biodiesel. Even if the tanks were available, the price was the same and **Ferndale's buses** **run** trouble free, Bellingham **schools** would do a test **run** before making the full conversion.

"I still wouldn't switch over the whole fleet," said Ron Cowan, the Bellingham assistant superintendent of business and operations. "Our cargo is too precious."

A 2005 report to the Legislature from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction expresses concern about the use of biodiesel potentially leading to engine failure, which means the driver losing the ability to steer or brake.

"The most serious issue was the one incident where a Northshore (**School** District in Bothell) **bus** stalled on railroad tracks," according to the report. "OSPI recommends that future pilot programs of this nature be conducted on equipment other than **school buses**."

But Clute said the **buses** haven't experienced any problems with engine failure or loss of power. Josh Clements, marketing manager for Bellingham-based Whole Energy Fuels and **Ferndale's** biodiesel supplier, said engine failure can be prevented by frequently changing fuel filters soon after the **buses** are switched to biodiesel. The fuel has a detergent effect, cleaning tanks and lines, and clogging filters.

Clements also said an electronic sensor on a model of smaller **buses** supposedly wasn't recognizing biodiesel because it is clearer than petroleum diesel, causing the sensor to shut down the engine. **Ferndale** hasn't had that problem, and Clements said he hasn't heard of that problem elsewhere.

The district is using a B20 blend because it remains a liquid at colder temperatures, while purer blends tend to turn to a gel.

Ferndale mechanic Jim Taylor feels better working around biodiesel because it burns much more cleanly, especially the 99-percent-biodiesel blend the district was using as a test **run** on one **bus** during the summer.

"I've tasted it," he said. "You could fry your eggs with it."

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