

THE BIODIESEL OPTION

Alternative fuel arrives in Skagit County

It's a blend of vegetable oil, petroleum

By JENNIFER CARTER Staff Writer

Rexville Grocery is known for its hard-to-find food products, odd knickknacks and chummy atmosphere. Now it has added another rare item to its inventory — diesel fuel made in part from vegetable oil.

Owner Stuart Welch last week began offering a biodiesel fuel blend at the pump that previously dispensed full-strength petroleum diesel.

The store, on Best Road between La Conner and Conway, may be the first in the county to offer the alternative fuel, Welch said. And he said he thinks the change marks the start of a fuel trend in the county that will grow as consumers discover the many benefits of biodiesel.

“We’re at the beginning of this right now,” he said.

Biodiesel is biodegradable. There are 45 plants manufacturing the fuel in the United States, according to the National Biodiesel Board, a trade organization for manufacturers. About 25 million gallons of biodiesel were produced in 2004, according to the group.

The blend Rexville Grocery carries is “B20,” a mix of 20 percent biodiesel and 80 percent petroleum diesel. Welch said B20 is “the most adaptable blend for most vehicles.” He said most standard diesel engines can run on the fuel with no modifications.

Cars with engines that can take full advantage of B20’s cleaner chemical properties may emit 10 percent less poisonous carbon monoxide gas than with regular diesel and 15 percent less particulate matter, which are tiny solid or liquid particles that can get into the lungs.

B20 may also produce 10 percent fewer hydrocarbons, a key ingredient for smog and 20 percent lower sulfate emissions, according to the EPA.

The only bad news in terms of emissions, according to the agency, is a 2 percent increase in nitrogen oxides, gases that contribute to health and environmental problems, including smog and global warming.

Welch said he researched biodiesel on the Internet and talked to regular diesel customers before deciding to replace the conventional diesel offered at the store with the blend.

Reducing emissions for a cleaner environment was just one incentive to make the switch, Welch said. Biodiesel also comes from a renewable domestic source, which will bring the nation greater energy independence, he said.

And though the vegetables used to make the fuel don’t currently come from Skagit County, Welch said he’s happy to find a new way to support farming rather than world oil producers.

“All agriculture is connected,” he said. “I would rather put the money in the pockets of

farmers.”

Welch didn't have to find a new supplier to replace standard diesel with a biodiesel blend. Associated Petroleum Products also offers the blend as well as the conventional diesel it previously supplied to Rexville Grocery.

“We want to be on the forefront of offering alternative fuels,” said Gary Fiedler, manager of the company's Sedro-Woolley plant.

The fuel blender and distributor, headquartered in Tacoma, also supplies biodiesel for King County Metro Transit, the largest user of biodiesel in the state.

APP blends conventional diesel with biodiesel from manufacturer Seattle Biodiesel, which makes the alternative fuel from soybean oil.

But Fiedler said the company is interested in reaching an agreement with Bellingham based producer Whole Energy to supply the fuel in Skagit County.

Whole Energy is gearing up to manufacture biodiesel at a former wood processing plant it is leasing from LignoTech at the intersection of Farm-to-Market Road and Highway 20.

Atul Deshmane, the company's president, said Whole Energy currently distributes biodiesel from other parts of the country but is starting to produce it at a pilot plant in Whatcom County with used vegetable oil from restaurants.

Deshmane said the LignoTech facility's storage capacity, good rail access and proximity to the Anacortes refineries, where the regular diesel with which biodiesel is often mixed is produced, make it a desirable site to start producing biodiesel in larger volumes.

At \$3.28 per gallon at Rexville Grocery Tuesday morning, B20 isn't the cheapest fuel. But if petroleum diesel prices were to peak again, Fiedler said, the vegetable oil derived blends could be a better deal.

Federal legislation that created an excise tax credit for manufacturers of biodiesel could help add to the savings. The credit is 1 cent per gallon for every percent of biodiesel in the mix. For B20, the credit is 20 cents per gallon.

Welch said prices for biodiesel should come down if demand increases and the fuel is produced locally instead of being shipped from Seattle.

For now, Welch said he hasn't had any complaints from customers about the decision to offer B20 instead of standard diesel fuel. Some customers make a conscious choice to buy the fuel, he said.

At least one customer didn't even notice the change, despite the large banner advertising “Biodiesel available here” hanging over the store's pumps. The next time he came in, Welch asked him what he thought of the biodiesel.

“He goes, ‘Biodiesel? What do you mean?’” Welch said.

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