

Cutting-edge Ferndale School District runs busses on bio-fuel

Second district in state to turn busses “green”

Taylor Phifer - Whatcom Independent

FERNDALE – In November of last year, Ferndale School District began operating its entire fleet of 39 school busses on B-20, a fuel mixture using 20 percent bio-fuel. Bio-diesel is a diesel-equivalent processed fuel, derived from biological sources like vegetable oil, and can be used in unmodified diesel engine vehicles. Ferndale is the second school district in Washington to exclusively use bio-diesel and the North West Clean Air Agency (NWCAA) has given them an \$8,000 grant to pursue the program, offsetting the cost for bio-diesel for the district for the entire year.

“Over the past few months, the district has conducted testing using bio-diesel on its fleet of 39 busses,” according to the Ferndale School District Transportation Office. “Mileage and performance were tracked, with both showing an increase by using B-20. Studies have demonstrated that emissions of certain pollutants are lower when burning bio-diesel compared to regular on-road diesel. Since diesel particulates have been found to be very hazardous, the use of bio-diesel will dramatically reduce the particulate levels and, thus, improve air quality, public health and the environment. Students will experience a safer and healthier ride to and from school.”

Currently, the technology costs a bit more per gallon but has shown an increase in economy and requires little equipment change from a standard diesel engine, according to Josh Clements of Whole Energy Fuels in Bellingham. Compared to a 100 percent diesel mix, B-20 has been shown to reduce carbon dioxide levels by 12 percent and lowers particulate emissions by more than 25 percent.

With an extremely volatile fuel market, bio-fuels are becoming more popular and competitive and will soon have a firm grip on the industry, according to Clements. In addition, Whole Energy Fuels, which currently transports the product from the mid-west, is planning to start local production in the next few years,

“We bring in our product from the mid-west and most of the cost is in transportation,” he said. “Once we obtain our goal of using local feed stocks and producing it here, it will drive down the cost and make it more competitive. Since fuel price so expensive, bio-diesel is getting more competitive.”

“(B-20) is about eight to 10 cents a gallon more than diesel, but bio-diesel’s price is very stable. I’ve been with the company for three years and we have had only three cost changes – one up and two down. It’s a very predictable price.”

Clute and Clements have been working closely to get the program up and running. Though the ease of transition and NWCAA grants were incentives, Clute says the environmental cost is what really drove him to make the change.

“It’s working out great,” Darrell Clute, Director of Transportation for Ferndale School District said. “There were initial things we had to look at and some initial problems. We had to make sure the engines were clean. We had to change the filters right away, but after that it’s been a great program. We’ve had absolutely no breakdowns because of the fuel. We have gotten lots of calls from the community saying the buses don’t smoke as much. Parents feel their kids are safer and we have gotten a lot of good comments from the community.”

“We got another grant for next year but we plan to continue the program even if we don’t get the grant in the future because we feel it’s that important,” Clute said. “Our job is to get the kids to and from school safely and it’s worked out great that way.”

Central Valley School District in Spokane is the only other school district in the state using bio-fuel in its buses and they, too, have seen nothing but benefit since starting the project in 2003.

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