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PSE offering new incentives for green power use

Bellingham now second, behind only Olympia, in statewide use of renewable energy



Heidi Schiller

Ice cream should be a treat for the environment as well as for people, according to Ben Scholtz, owner of Mallard Ice Cream.

That's why purchasing 100 percent green energy for his shop's electricity bill was a breeze.

"Ice cream is a treat. It's a luxury product and we shouldn't tax our environment unnecessarily for a luxury product. A treat should be for you, and for the world," he said. "The experience is better if you enjoy it, knowing it's also — as much as possible — creating positive things in the world."

Increasingly, business owners like Scholtz are making adjustments — some small, some large — in their business plans to reduce their environmental impact.

Purchasing green energy is

Ben Scholtz, owner of Mallard Ice Cream, purchases 100 percent of his shop's energy from renewable, 'green' energy sources, through a program with Puget Sound Energy. Scholtz said he thinks his products, which are luxury items, should not have to hurt the environment to be available to the consumer.

one of the ways they can do that, and Sustainable Connections, Puget Sound Energy and the City of Bellingham have spearheaded a campaign to make it easier, called the Green Power Community Challenge, which kicked off Sept. 2.

Wind and solar and gas, oh my!

Green power, or green energy, is a term used to describe renewable energy created from three sources — wind, solar and methane.

PSE — the ninth-largest purchaser of renewable energy in the United States — is able to purchase some of its power from these sources, located across Washington, Oregon and Idaho, when customers choose to pay for green power credits as part of their monthly electricity bills.

The energy predominately comes from wind farms in the Columbia River Gorge and the Central Cascades. Smaller amounts also come from solar power and methane gas captured from cows, landfills and waste streams.

PSE pays these generators a price premium, above the normal price for power, to use their energy. When customers purchase green power credits, they help PSE purchase this energy.

Vander Haak Dairy is a local example of how the process works. The dairy farm, located north of Lynden, is the only dairy digester, or producer of methane power, in Washington state, owner Darryl Vander Haak said. Farmers capture the methane from cows — food goes in one end, and methane comes out the other — and sell it to PSE. The power then goes into PSE's grid.

"Methane is a greenhouse gas in itself, so you get a triple environmental benefit from capturing that gas," said Derek Long, program and development director for Sustainable Connections. "You keep the methane out of the atmosphere, you turn it into electricity that, at least theoretically, replaces the need to produce non-green types of power," he said. "The other benefit is helping the farmers with waste management because the stuff is contained, rather than spread on fields ... which can cause water-quality issues."

Long said the methane energy production is a way to keep farms viable — a win-win situation.

"Maybe the price of milk isn't what (dairy farmers) would like it to be, and so this provides an extra revenue stream for them," he said.

Vander Haak confirmed this.

"Right now, it's better than dairying," he said. "Milk prices are quite low."

Why go green?

Long said having diverse electricity production methods is important in the face of worldwide fossil-fuel depletion.

"Investing now in resources that we know will be constantly renewable into the future is good for keeping businesses going," he said. "We're believers in distributed production as well, so instead of having three huge sources of power generation in the state, wouldn't it be great to have thousands, and keep small businesses going, like these dairy farmers?"

No emissions are associated with producing renewable energy, so using it helps reduce climate change, he said.

"Increasingly, I think people are aware that climate change can have a direct impact on businesses and how they operate. There are very few credible scientists that disagree that climate change is real, and that humans are contributing to it," he said. "Now the discussion comes down to what we're going to do about it."

For Scholtz, whose ice cream business relies heavily on freezers and refrigeration, the solution was simple — go 100 percent green.

Because his sole product inherently requires so much electricity to make, Scholtz couldn't cut down on the amount of electricity he used, but at least he could purchase it in a more sustainable way, he said.

Three years ago, he began buying a small amount of green power each month, and then a year ago, he decided to make his entire energy bill go toward green power. He now pays about \$1,000 a month for electricity. That's approximately \$60 more a month than he would spend without purchasing any green power, he said.

"It's in line with our values and our customers' values," he said. "We have a larger principle for our business to try to reduce waste and make our purchasing choices go to things that are building better community infrastructure in the long run."

A campaign to green the grid

Currently, 110 businesses in Whatcom County purchase some amount of green power, which costs about 2 cents more per kilowatt-hour than regular electricity, said Heather Mulligan, green power market manager for PSE. As an example, The Bellingham Business Journal in June used 693.6 kilowatt hours, at a rate of roughly 7 cents per kilowatt hour, for a total bill of \$48.40. Switching to 100 percent green power would raise that bill to \$62.37.

About 0.6 percent to 0.7 percent of Whatcom County's current electricity usage comes from green power.

The Green Power Community Challenge sponsors want to see that number increase to 2 percent by the campaign's endpoint in March. With that percentage, the Environmental Protection Agency will designate Bellingham a Green Power Community, providing the city with highway signs and national press opportunities. Only three cities in the U.S. — Eugene, Ore.; Moab, Utah and Boulder, Colo. — can boast that designation.

Long got the idea for a campaign after reading in PSE's newsletter that Olympia has more green energy participation than Bellingham — Bellingham is second in the state behind Olympia — and his sense of healthy competition with the city took over.

Western Washington University's decision earlier this year to purchase 100 percent of its energy as green power also influenced the initiative.

Sustainable Connections began talks with Mayor Mark Asmundson and PSE representatives, and the campaign took shape. The city announced in July it would purchase 100 percent green power and will work with neighborhood associations to increase residential green power usage, while Sustainable Connections is behind the effort for increased business participation.

Long said the addition of an estimated 50 businesses and 1,000 houses could accomplish the 2 percent goal.

Going the green mile

Businesses can sign up for a minimum of \$4 a month, or can have a PSE representative evaluate their annual electricity usage and come up with dollar-amount options for varying percentages of a monthly bill.

Rick Adelstein, president of Louis Auto Glass, signed up in July to add \$20 per month more to his Bellingham store's electricity bill.

"This is a starting point. It's not overwhelming," he said. "You'll get a lot further with 100 businesses supporting green power at lower percentages than a very few (businesses) at 100 percent. The more the merrier."

While Scholtz said the amount seems small, he can understand why businesses may be hesitant to sign up.

"A lot of businesses don't want to spend even a little bit more," he said. "When you're running a small business and you're thinking about cutting costs, that money adds up."

Long said Sustainable Connections wants to provide incentives for businesses to go the extra mile, and is providing businesses that sign up with newspaper inserts and logo displays on progress markers around town, as well as Internet exposure.

PSE will provide participating businesses with in-store displays and door decals, he said.

While Scholtz said he thinks most of his customers already assume Mallard purchases green power, these types of marketing and branding opportunities can help other businesses increase their customer base.

“If someone could go anywhere for carpet cleaning, and a business advertises 100 percent green energy, it might be just the sort of thing to distinguish your business,” he said.

Long agreed, and said that more importantly, Bellingham business owners will want to participate because of a desire to improve their community and environment.

“There is a strong appetite from business owners for good ideas that make sense from a business or a bottom-line perspective, as well as an environmental one,” he said. “If we can help business owners find creative solutions, then they’re going to participate.”

For more info ...

To sign up to purchase green energy as part of the campaign, go to Sustainable Connections’ Green Power Community Challenge Web site:

www.sconnect.org/practices/greenpower/document_view

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