

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

POSTED: Thursday, Sep. 10, 2009

WWU gets \$500,000 grant to help turn cow manure into fuel for bus

ZOE FRALEY - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - Come next spring, Whatcom County residents could be riding a bus powered by cow manure, thanks to a \$500,000 grant for Western Washington University's Vehicle Research Institute.

The U.S. Department of Energy grant will expand the VRI's Biomethane for Transportation Project, which works with Vander Haak dairy in Lynden to turn cow waste into clean-burning biomethane. That biomethane could then be used to power a revamped Bellair Charters bus.

"I didn't really ever dream of that," Darryl Vander Haak, who owns the farm with his son, said of biomethane-powered transportation. "It's kind of exciting to see what can happen in that field. It's green energy."



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At the Vander Haak dairy, manure is put into an anaerobic digester to separate solids from gases, and the gases are then run through a scrubber to remove contaminants. The biomethane is then clean and ready to burn in a combustible engine, where it should

produce about 95 percent less carbon than a traditionally fueled engine, according to the university.

"These buses will essentially become carbon negative once they have the new engines installed," VRI Director Eric Leonhardt said in a WWU press release. "Not only will they produce a fraction of the (carbon dioxide) they did before the conversion, but they are also using a renewable resource made from cow manure, which would ordinarily just add its greenhouse gases to the atmosphere."

Leonhardt couldn't be reached this week for an interview.

Offering a biomethane-powered bus is an exciting possibility for Bellair Charters, said Larry Wickkiser, the company's charter and contract salesman.

"It's clean-burning, it carries people and it'll be fun to promote," he said. "Just think of all the funny lines ... udderly fantastic."

The company was going to provide one of its 36-passenger motor coaches to be converted for the project, but it recently signed on to use all of those for the 2010 Winter Olympics. Bellair is now looking to purchase another motor coach or a 30- to 33-passenger minibus, either of which would be converted to run on biomethane and could be on the road as early as next spring. Wickkiser thinks this might be one of the first commercial uses of this technology.

"We would love to be that far ahead of the rest of the country," he said. "I think it'll be a good thing for everybody and for the creativity of the private sector."

Though there are still plenty of questions about how to work with biomethane technology, the company is happy to try to get away from depending on foreign oil.

"You're in your backyard with your fuel source, it's being produced from waste products and it's going to good use," Wickkiser said. "What's not to like?"