

Media Advisory – Sept. 23, 2008

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County canola dryer creates step toward new crops, energy

Snohomish County has started drying more than 400 acres of canola seed that local farmers will turn into biodiesel for county fleet vehicles.

County Executive Aaron Reardon launched the project Tuesday with local farmers at the county-owned seed dryer located at the county's Cathcart Operations Center. The dryer is a double-boost to the county as it runs on methane gas given off by the Cathcart landfill, which is adjacent to the project site.

“We said we wanted to be part of the solution to lessening our dependence on foreign oil and to helping our farmers find renewed economic viability through new crops,” Reardon said. “Today, we once again put strong, positive actions behind those words.”

In 2005, local farmers approached Executive Reardon with hopes of developing markets for locally grown products while highlighting the importance of farming to Snohomish County residents. At the same time, the county was looking for ways to reduce its dependence on foreign oil as well as reduce petroleum-based diesel emissions.

Reardon immediately began efforts to protect and enhance the county's diminishing agricultural foundation while researching better ways to fuel the county's fleet.

Within months, county farmers had biodiesel seed crops growing in Snohomish County to test their viability here. With help from local, state and federal funding sources, Snohomish County also began building infrastructure to process canola and other crops locally.

Snohomish County initially provided funding worth about \$80,000 to develop the project and trial runs for canola during a two-year period. Another \$410,000 was made available this year to purchase a seed dryer and to convert landfill gas into a fuel source for the dryer.

Federal appropriations worth \$344,400 also have helped the county secure the dryer, which is now at the Cathcart property.

“I am proud to have partnered with Snohomish County for this remarkable project that will help preserve farmland, reduce reliance on foreign oil and power their fleet of vehicles in a more environmentally friendly way,” said Sen. Patty Murray, who led the push for federal funding. “This project is an example of local leaders coming together with a common vision to find actual solutions to some of the challenges we face today.”

A crusher, purchased with \$500,000 in state Energy Freedom Funds, will be available by the end of the year. Seed crushing for this initial harvest will begin when the new crusher system is delivered.

“This is historic like the first light bulb,” said state Rep. Hans Dunshee, who helped secure the state funding. “Here is a new fuel for a new economy, and there’s nothing too wrong with that.”

The primary focus for the Cathcart investment is for canola as a new crop and biodiesel production, but farming of biofuels also will create a positive impact for farmers growing other grains. Local farmers now will have other crops to rotate in their existing and fallow fields, and other seed such as mustard can be sent to commodity markets after it is dried and crushed.

This year, approximately 400 acres of canola and mustard seed will be dried and crushed as part of this project. This fall, acreage is expected to increase to as much as 750 acres of canola and other seed, and an additional 200 acres should be planted next spring.

“Already, we’re seeing great interest from local farmers who need these new crops,” Reardon said. “I have no doubt we’ll reach our goal in terms of locally produced biofuel for our fleet.”

An estimated 1,000 to 1,200 acres of oilseeds would be sufficient to provide enough B20 biodiesel for the county’s entire diesel fleet.

By 2014, it’s estimated that as much as 4,000 acres of Snohomish County farmland will be planted in canola and other biofuel seed crops, giving Snohomish County farmers a new source of economic development, local government a home-grown fuel source and residents a cleaner environment.

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