

Biofuel getting warm reception

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By this time next year, the start of a potentially new era in home heating – one with some extra green – will be well underway here.

Washington will have joined Minnesota as the second state in the country that mandates the use of renewable biofuels. Many of the state's home heating oil companies are welcoming the mandate, which takes effect Dec. 1 this year. They say it will focus consumer attention on biodiesel as an alternative to standard home heating oil. The latter is a 100% petroleum-based product.

The biofuels mandate, which the Washington Legislature adopted in 2006, requires that 2 percent of all diesel fuels sold statewide are biofuels which are made from recycled frying oil, animal fat or vegetable oil from crops such as soybean and canola.

Industry officials said the mandate comes at an opportune time for the state's heating oil dealers, which are primarily small, family-owned business. Dealers are battling for market share against the state's four large utility companies, which have claimed that natural gas is the cleanest and most efficient fuel source. The implication is that home heating oil is "dirty" or "inefficient," dealers say.

"The reality is that heating oil can be cleaner and more efficient than natural gas due to significant improvements in furnaces, particularly for homeowners opting to use a blend of biodiesel mixed with regular heating oil. No modifications to an existing oil furnace are necessary for many types of biodiesel," said Christopher Allen, the vice president of Acme Fuel in Olympia.

The appeal of biodiesel is helping reinvigorate the entire home heating oil industry, according to Steve Clark, president of Genesee Fuel and Heating, which has been selling heating oil to Maple Valley and Covington residents since 1999. Oil heat dealers reportedly are getting calls from people who otherwise might have converted to natural gas, and from people who like the option of buying a domestically produced fuel source from a local, family-owned business instead of a large utility company.

"Many homeowners are eager to use a renewable fuel source that reduces our country's dependence on foreign oil and helps the environment," Clark said. "We've had customers who have bought new heating oil furnaces instead of switching to natural gas because they're enthusiastic about supporting the growth of biodiesel."

Until now, most Washington heating oil dealers have grown their biodiesel business through word of mouth and company newsletters. But with the state's biofuels mandate expected to create demand for 20 million gallons of biodiesel in its first year, the prospects for biodiesel's growth are exciting, according to industry leaders. They note that as more Washington farmers sell their canola crops to biodiesel refineries, prices might drop, which could convince even more customers that biodiesel is an ecological and economical way to stay warm.