

## **Bioheat gains fans among ecominded**

**Blend aims to cut use of fossil fuel**

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Wood stoves and fireplaces. Sweaters, wool socks and long johns. Fluffy down comforters.

These are among the myriad ways ecosensitive Seattleites such as Renata Lillig cope with their consciences every winter, finding ways to keep warm without having to drain the finite resources of crude oil or natural gas from the planet.

So a notice by Laurelhurst Oil Co. offering to sell Lillig bioheat for her home heating system got her attention last month.

Bioheat is a blend of petroleum-based heating oil and biodiesel. At least two Seattle companies, Laurelhurst on the north end and Genesee Fuel and Heating Co. in the south, are offering the blend to customers, hoping to meet the desires of environmentally conscious Puget Sound-area residents -- and that an increase in demand will fuel a new economy in Washington.

For the past five years, companies have been offering bioheat on the East Coast, where many more homes use oil-burning furnaces. Genesee began its bioheat program last year and found many customers eager to use it, regardless of cost.

"We've hardly done any marketing on our biodiesel," said Steve Clark, president of Genesee Heat. "It's definitely not a money-saving alternative at this point."

Seattle Biodiesel, a local plant that refines canola and soybean vegetable oil into diesel, now gets a lot of its raw product by rail from the Midwest. The cost of transporting the product pushes the price up. But biodiesel advocates are hopeful that more soybean and rapeseed, from which canola oil is produced, eventually will be grown in the state.

If that happened, the price of oil could stabilize and supply should increase. For now, companies are working to increase the demand to push for it, Clark said.

"It's a chicken-and-egg thing," Clark explained. "Manufacturers, farmers, all interested parties don't want

to commit themselves until they know there's a demand."

Clark and Laurelhurst Oil manager Tom Marier both said their customers are asking for the biodiesel blend and using it as a matter of principle, not bothering with the fact that it might be just as expensive or a few cents more per gallon than regular heating oil.

"I want to do what I can to reduce our dependence on oil. I mean, we're going to war for goodness sakes," Lillig said. "It's just atrocious what they're doing to us because of oil."

Lillig thought bioheat sounded great -- less dependence on petroleum and an opportunity to invigorate the state's agriculture industry. But the vegetable oil used to make biodiesel is so clean, it acts as a solvent and can damage parts in most home heating systems made with galvanized and yellow metals.

That's why the companies offering bioheat are providing blends of from 10 percent to 30 percent biodiesel with the regular petroleum-based heating oil.

As much as she hates to use fossil fuels, Lillig, who just bought a new furnace in 2001, has decided to hold off this year.

Marier said he can't blame her. "We're certainly not pushing anyone on it. I'm sure that they have concerns. Even I have concerns. That's why we're only using a blend."

The technology is so new that no one really knows for sure what the long-term effects will be on furnaces. But research conducted by the National Oil Heat Research Alliance and some others indicates that biodiesel should not increase wear on modern systems.

And at least one manufacturer has told Marier that the company is producing a steel pump that is fully compatible with 100 percent biodiesel.

"This is just the beginning," Marier said. "Our goal is to eventually go 100 percent."

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