

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## Caution flag raised in race to embrace biofuels

Local officials question impact on environment

*Last updated May 8, 2008 9:35 p.m. PT*

**By LISA STIFFLER**  
P-I REPORTER

Local officials behind the enthusiastic rush toward biofuels are tapping the brakes, thanks to mounting concerns about the impact on food supplies and the environment. Representatives of Seattle, King County and the University of Washington this week said they wanted to take a closer look at where the fuel comes from and what effect it's having on the planet.

"We absolutely have to make wise choices in our biofuels policy," King County Councilman Reagan Dunn said.

On Thursday, the Republican councilman from Bellevue introduced legislation requiring the county to study biodiesel's impact on food shortages; the amount of greenhouse gas emissions caused from growing, refining, transporting and burning the fuel; and how its use affects the county's efforts to meet climate change goals.

King County burned about 1.7 million gallons of biodiesel last year. Its supplier, Imperium Renewables, uses Canadian canola for its fuel.

There are advantages to biofuels -- whether it's ethanol added to gasoline or biodiesel added to diesel. The fuel replaces petroleum imported from foreign countries, creating a domestic fuel source and improving U.S. energy independence. Burning biodiesel causes less air pollution; at low concentrations, ethanol reduces pollution for some chemicals, but not others.

Sugar cane, soybeans, canola and palm oil used to make biofuels can in some circumstances cut the amount of greenhouse gases produced compared with fossil fuels. Potential biofuel sources of the future -- native grasses and algae in particular -- consume more carbon dioxide than their use creates.

But biofuels are far from a perfect alternative to petroleum. The primary U.S. biofuel sources -- corn and soybeans -- can divert food from grocery stores to fuel tanks, raising prices and contributing to global food shortages. Some biofuel sources require large amounts of water, fertilizers and pesticides to produce.

The greatest environmental impact from biofuels is land use. Growing biofuels leaves less land available for food crops. That means more land is cleared for crops and fuel worldwide, including rainforests, grasslands and woodlands. Disturbing that land releases greenhouse gases, tipping the equation so that biofuels production and use generates even more carbon dioxide than petroleum.

Solutions that prevent those releases include farming land that's already been disturbed, harvesting native grasses, growing algae in containers or man-made ponds that don't compete for farm or natural lands, or by using waste such as used cooking oil and woody debris from the timber industry for fuel.

Some environmentalists and scientists urge people to pursue biofuels cautiously.

"What is needed is to pause and take a look at what are the spectrum of issues," said Martha Groom, a scientist at the University of Washington Bothell campus who recently published a paper comparing the environmental footprint of different biofuels.

The UW Seattle campus over the past year used more than 3,100 gallons of biodiesel in a 5 percent blend in its trucks and buses. Plans to increase the mix to 20 percent were put on hold when students raised concerns about food impacts.

"On the surface biofuels are something we can get very excited about," said Josh Kavanagh, UW director of Transportation Services. "But when we take the time to understand all the possible implications, the decision-making process is long."

Kavanagh is working to develop the school's policy for buying and using biodiesel.

The city of Seattle used more than 700,000 gallons of canola-derived biodiesel last year. Mayor Greg Nickels said he's happy with the product, but was interested in looking at its effects.

"We'll analyze that," he said. "And check ... the potential sources and make sure we're doing the right thing."

There are national and international efforts that could one day make that analysis easier. The Council for Sustainable Biomass Production has convened a group of oil and biofuel companies, environmentalists, academics and government workers. They're trying to craft standards for environmentally sound fuels. The standards could be adopted voluntarily or form a certification system, possibly like the ones used to certify eco-friendly timber.

The Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels is working on the issue at the international level.

In the meantime, the county will do its own review of biofuel impacts.

"We're eager to do it," said Jim Lopez, deputy chief of staff for Executive Ron Sims. "It's part of our climate plan."

Dunn wants the study completed by the end of the year.

"We need to make sure we're using good science," he said, "and doing what's best for the environment and world hunger."

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*P-I reporter Lisa Stiffler can be reached at 206-448-8042 or [lisastiffler@seattlepi.com](mailto:lisastiffler@seattlepi.com). Read her blog on the environment at [datelineearth.com](http://datelineearth.com).*

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