

Green is red hot at World Ag Expo in Tulare

Event is loaded with environmentally friendly products as farm companies look to save both money and the Earth.

Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2009

By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

TULARE -- Solar power, insulation made from vegetable oil and trucks powered by cow manure grabbed the attention of visitors at the World Ag Expo on Wednesday.

"If it's green, it's hot right now," said Darryl Conklin, president of Renewable Technologies Inc., a Sutter Creek alternative energy company that sells solar and wind systems.

Conklin said about half his business comes from wineries and farm companies looking to shave costs and reduce their impact on the environment.

"It's a natural for farmers," Conklin said. "They really understand the concept of being stewards of the land and sustainability."

New companies throughout the expo's massive showgrounds sold green products or hawked new technology using renewable sources.

Dairy operator Rob Hilarides of Lindsay unveiled his effort to rid himself of dependency on diesel and gasoline.

Hilarides has converted two of his heavy-duty diesel trucks and six pickups to run on biomethane gas he has collected and processed from the cows on his dairy.

Hilarides said the project -- a public-private partnership -- holds tremendous potential for the state's dairy farmers. He did not disclose its cost.

"This has been a major undertaking," Hilarides said. "But right now I am offsetting the use of 200 gallons a day of diesel and 40 gallons of gasoline."

Mike Marsh, CEO of Western United Dairyman in Modesto, said the biomethane project was helped by a \$600,000 state grant and he hopes other sources of funding can be found to help expand it to other dairies.

"This really could be a model for the rest of California, if not the rest of the nation," Marsh said.

State and federal officials praised the cow-powered trucks saying the vehicles are better for the environment because they produce fewer emissions.

"Emissions of diesel particulate are a big problem, but it may pale in comparison to our energy situation," said Kerry Drake, associate director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's air division. "I can't tell you how important it is to have a renewable source of energy, and you have it right here, together in one place."

Dan Pellissier, California deputy secretary of energy policy coordination, said in a statement that "biomethane provides clean, renewable energy without competing for the state's fertile farmlands."

Pecan farmer Dustin Miller of Texas was among those looking for green alternatives and ways to save money. He stopped to talk with representatives of Energy Recyclers, a Fresno-based company that sells a capacitor that can help motors run more cheaply and efficiently.

The company claims its product can save farmers 8% to 30% of their electrical consumption.

"If it does what they say it does, then it is definitely worth taking a look at," Miller said.

His wife, Jessica Miller, put it more directly: "Everyone wants to try and help the environment, including us."

Mordy Fogel, account executive with Base Plastics, also got his share of visitors. The New York company sells plastic bags made with 50% less polyethylene material, making them more environmentally friendly.

Fogel said the company's products are stronger than conventional plastic and can be used in many industries, including dairy, tree fruit, tomato and frozen vegetables.

Several San Joaquin Valley nut processors are using the bags and liners.

"It is important to our company to live in harmony with nature," Fogel said. "And our product can do that."

Also using more natural ingredients is the spray foam insulation being sold by Demilec of Texas. The insulation uses 20% vegetable oil in place of petroleum-based products. It can be used in homes and commercial buildings.

"What we tell people is that the first step in being more environmental is using less energy," said sales representative Mac Sheldon.