

UNIVERSITY GOES A TAD GREENER

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KEENE - A local university plans to convert several major campus buildings to biomass energy in a continuing effort to go green.

Franklin Pierce University in Rindge this summer will begin phase one of a three-phase project to convert its major campus buildings to wood pellet heating as a way of cutting costs and reducing its carbon footprint.

The first phase of the project will convert 180,000 square feet of space in four buildings -- currently burning 158,000 gallons of oil and propane -- to a wood pellet-burning system to heat water and air.

"There are several advantages to heating a portion of our campus with biomass such as wood pellets," said university President George Hagerty. "The first advantage is cost savings and the ability to more accurately project energy costs. Another important benefit is that wood pellets are a community-based, local and renewable resource."

Over the past year, university officials created a sustainability committee made up of faculty, staff and students as part of an effort to make the university a greener place. As a result, the committee inventoried the university's greenhouse gas emissions and has taken steps to reduce cafeteria waste and encourage recycling.

"We've also already started using a biodiesel blend in campus vehicles and heavy equipment as part of the effort," said Doug Lear, director of facilities.

To continue this effort, the university will replace an oil-burning boiler at Granite Hall and a propane gas-burning boiler at Northfields Activity Center with wood pellet-boilers. Once tied into the piping systems, those new energy sources will supply heating for FPU's Granite, New Hampshire and Mount Washington halls, the Northfields airframe and the sports and recreation facility, Lear said.

"The existing boilers will be left in place for redundancy," Lear said. "The silos (feeding the wood boilers) will be filled with a two-week supply of fuel. . . . The system will be metered, kind of like electric use, so we will pay for only what we use."

International WoodFuels LLC of Portland, Maine won the heating contract and has agreed to provide equipment for free, said Bruce Kirsh, university vice president. He declined to give further details on the contract, but said the only cost to the university will be purchasing the wood pellets.

Kirsh said that the university will move forward with converting other buildings to more efficient and environmentally friendly heating sources as capital budgets and technology permits.

Neither Lear nor Kirsh would say what the university spends yearly for oil and propane, or how much emissions would be reduced by making the switch. Kirsh did say they anticipate saving about 7 to 10 percent on fuel costs.

Jon Strimling, owner Pelletsales.com, headquartered in Goffstown, pointed out that the cost and environmental savings can be immense.

"Heating represents a substantial fraction of our energy use in this country," said Strimling. "Even now with oil prices going down, bulk pellets are still cheaper."

Both propane and oil top out around \$40 per million BTUs according to the Energy Information Institute, a division of the U.S. Department of Energy. Bulk pellets generally cost a little more than \$15 per million BTU, according to the Pellet Fuels Institute, a non-profit association that serves the pellet industry.

As for the environment, pellet heat is considered carbon neutral, meaning it has little to no effect on the environment.

According to the Pellet Fuels Institute, using biofuel eliminates 75 percent of the carbon emissions associated with fossil fuel heating and has three times the impact of driving a hybrid car.

"The University's commitment to green energy heating systems will be a significant step in the move towards climate neutrality, said Dr. Catherine Owen Koning, professor of environmental science at Franklin Pierce. "While burning any form of wood does release carbon dioxide, the dense and healthy forests of New Hampshire take in this carbon dioxide. . . . So as long as the forests regrow as fast as they are cut and burned, this form of heating is sustainable and adds no net carbon to the atmosphere."

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