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ENVIRONMENT

Bellingham groups step up to Green Power challenge

Renewable-energy use in community up to 11 percent

KIRA MILLAGE

BELLINGHAM — It's Earth Day and hundreds of Bellingham residents celebrated this weekend by continuing the fight for renewable energy.

Bellingham was recognized by the Environmental Protection Agency on Saturday as a Green Power Community, the first in the state and only the seventh in the country.

"Congratulations to Bellingham for setting a national example," said U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Everett, during the ceremony at the Bellingham Farmers Market. "In Congress ... we're looking to cities like Bellingham for lessons we need to learn."

The EPA announcement comes at the end of the sixmonth Green Power Community Challenge, during which the city was challenged to increase its use of green power from 0.6 percent to 2 percent by Earth Day, said Michelle Long, executive director of Sustainable Connections, one of the partners in the challenge.

But the city well surpassed the goal. Between residents, businesses and city and county government, Bellingham will be purchasing more than 11 percent of all electricity used from green power resources.

"I'm not the least bit surprised because I predicted it," said Mark Asmundson, who was mayor during the launch of the challenge. "I knew we here in the community would support spending a quarter-million dollars to do the right thing."

Puget Sound Energy partnered with Sustainable Connections and the city of Bellingham for the challenge and offers customers the opportunity to purchase blocks of 160 or 320 kilowatt hours of green power for \$2 or \$4.

And even though Bellingham's not the first community to be green, it does have the distinction of purchasing double the amount of green power than anyone else. The community will purchase about 76 million kilowatt hours of green energy in a year.

"People in Bellingham are not going to sit on their thumbs waiting for the government to tell us what to do," said Mayor Tim Douglas.

The governmental operations of the city of Bellingham and Whatcom County, as well as all of Western Washington University, will be run on green power, according to the EPA.

Green power comes from renewable sources including solar energy, wind energy and cow energy from methane digesters. Whatcom County has the only methane digester in the state and will probably be getting a few more in the coming year, Long said.

"We really do value our environment and quality of life here," said County Executive Pete Kremen. "It's not just a slogan."

Reach Kira Millage at kira.millage@bellinghamherald.com or call 715-2266.