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## Fill 'er up with wood, then go

**By Lisa Chiu**

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Among the many SUVs, trucks towing watercraft and motorcycles jamming the parking lot at Ballard's Golden Gardens Park yesterday was a vehicle unlike any other.

Owner Timm Dowden, of Silvana, Snohomish County, calls his modified 1985 Ford Ranger a biomass gasifier, but the sign he tapes to the hood sums it up more simply: "Runs on Wood."

Visitors headed to the beach stopped to marvel at the concept and asked Dowden how he's able to get his truck, which has 188,000 miles on it, to run on wood pellets.

"I think it's fascinating," said Grace Huus, 73, from Minnesota, who was visiting her grandchildren in Seattle. "I'm really glad I'm not buying gas here; it's 40 cents more expensive than back home."

She and her husband, Jack, had planned to drive their trailer here this winter but will likely change their plans because of high gasoline prices, she said.

"We have to do something about using renewable energy," Jack Huus, 71, said. "For the last six years, it's been a disaster; the government has not even talked about it."

It was precisely that frustration with government that led Dowden, 40, to his creation. Disappointed by last year's presidential election, he said he mourned for a month, then decided to "do something."

Last winter, using found materials and spending about \$300, he started fashioning the truck, using his expertise as a metalworker. He finished in April and is driving it around to beaches, parks and other public places to show others how to make their own.

Wood and charcoal-burning vehicles were mass-produced during World War II in Australia, Europe and Asia, Dowden said, but they never took off in the United States, which did not have widespread gas shortages.

In 1998, however, the Federal Emergency Management Agency published an instruction booklet on how to use the fuel for tractors and trucks in the event the gasoline supply was disrupted.

Dowden has two recycled oil drums attached to the back of his pickup, one for wood chips and one containing sawdust for filtering gases.

The burning wood creates carbon monoxide and hydrogen, combustible gases he routes through filters to the engine. It's safe, he says, because all the parts are welded together, and a vacuum keeps the gases from leaking.

The wood pellets are the same ones used for wood stoves and cost about \$3 for a 40-pound bag; 1 pound can power the truck for a mile. Despite his modifications, the car can still run on gasoline.

Dowden uses wood only when driving around his neighborhood, because the fastest the truck can go is 55 miles an hour. With gasoline, he can go 75 miles an hour.

Dowden said he learned at an early age the importance of alternative fuels. In the middle of the fuel crisis in the 1970s, he would have to siphon gas from his mother's car to his father's truck because they were only allotted 5 gallons a day.

A few years later he came across a magazine article showing how to make a biomass gasifier, and he vowed he'd try it one day.

While most visitors yesterday expressed support for his work, Dowden has heard criticism from tree lovers.

"They say 'Stop burning trees' and think it's better to burn oil over trees," he said. "But burning gas is burning up millions of years of organic products. Fossil fuels are precious. They are a gift from the gods."

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