

Renewable not the same as sustainable

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KAHULUI – As Maui rushes to embrace alternative energy, a local group has formed to push a bottom-up approach to sustainability.

Kelly King, who put together the Sustainable Biodiesel Alliance, presented it to about 20 people at a meeting of the Kahului Kiwanis Club this week.

At the heart of her view is the distinction between “renewable” and “sustainable.”

“Renewable energy isn’t always sustainable. People are starting to figure that out,” King said.

Although she never mentioned the name, the other side is represented by BlueEarth Biofuels, which in alliance with Hawaiian Electric Co. is planning a \$61 million biodiesel refinery at the Maui Electric Co.’s Waena generating site in Puunene. It would have a capacity of 40 million gallons per year, expandable to 120 million gallons.

King and her husband, Bob, already run 10 biodiesel refineries, with a total capacity less than 40 mg.

That’s the difference, she says, between “two very distinct models,” centralized and decentralized.

She portrays centralized alternative energy as dependent on a “high-density” feedstock (natural gas field, palm oil plantation), long-distance delivery of the raw materials (using a lot of energy to be moved) and “a negative economic balance for the end-user community.”

“This is what we see in petroleum,” King said.

It also describes BlueEarth’s proposal, which would initially import a vegetable oil and, according to King, export the money involved to Mainland investors.

By contrast, a decentralized system uses locally available raw materials in small producing facilities with a short trip to market.

“It keeps energy dollars in the community,” she said.

She said that describes Pacific Biodiesel, which began its operations as a way to dispose of waste cooking oils and has operated at the Central Maui Landfill for a decade. Demand on Maui has expanded beyond the available oil sources, while the company has been contracted to develop similar and larger plants on Oahu, in Japan and elsewhere in the U.S.

All the product (less than a million gallons a year) is sold on Maui.

BlueEarth, responding to criticism of its plan to utilize palm oil, asked the Natural Resources

Defense Council to devise a sustainability policy, which was presented at a public meeting in July.

This involves a system of certifying producers and denying certification to any who burn down rain forests to plant oil palms, or who use other objectionable practices.

King says that is not really sustainable.

Among her many objections is that Maui would still be dependent on imports.

"Our goal is to stabilize fuel prices," she said.

But that will never be achieved, she said, if Maui is at the mercy of decisions made in the Middle East or Indonesia.

BlueEarth and HECO said they plan to encourage local production of a feedstock crop, although which crop is still up for discussion.

That is almost the only point upon which the dueling sustainability advocates agree.

King said she foresees local production of virgin oils, since the supply of recyclable oils and fats is limited.

She tackled the "food vs. fuel" argument, which says that in a hungry world it is unwise to turn food products into fuel.

King noted that some biofuel crops are inedible, such as jatropha.

"But what if we did anyway . . . and there was a big disaster and the issue was whether to eat or to drive? We could eat our fuel crop," she said.

The Sustainable Biofuels Alliance, in cooperation with other renewable fuels advocates, will devise a competing system of sustainable guidelines.

A logo (three green droplets) will someday allow customers to identify which kind of sustainability their biofuel is promoting – the centralized, BlueEarth/

NRDC approach or the decentralized Sustainable Biodiesel Alliance approach.

"Sustainable biofuels standards, when implemented, will provide both the industry and the consumer with the confidence that the fuel they are using meets performance requirements," according to a Sustainable Bio-diesel Alliance explanation of its purpose. More information is available at [www.sustainable](http://www.sustainablebiodieselalliance.com)

[biodieselalliance.com](http://www.sustainablebiodieselalliance.com).

As Pacific Biodiesel expands its reach, the Kings are improving on their technology, Kelly King said, and they are refining their decentralization concept.

Their Sequential Pacific Biofuels refinery in Salem, Ore., is being expanded from 1 million gallons a year to 5 million gallons, and improved processing technology will mean total recycling of byproducts, she said.

She was pleased that Oregon's legislature, which like Hawaii's has passed a law to encourage renewables, requires that feedstocks be local. So palm oil is out, although Oregon produces raw materials such as canola oil and beef tallow.

King's example of an almost perfect local, decentralized system is the Pacific Biodiesel Texas refinery in Carls Corner, Texas.

King said the local cotton gin was about to close. Part of the reason was that it couldn't find a market for its cottonseed.

It was getting only about 13 cents a pound for it.

Cottonseed oil can be used to make fuel, and singer Willie Nelson, who is part of the Sustainable Biodiesel Alliance, encouraged the century-old cotton-processing plant to hang in there until the 2.5 million gallon per year biodiesel refinery is in operation.

Pacific Biodiesel Texas agreed to pay 21 or 22 cents per pound for the cottonseed, which King says has revived local agriculture.

There will be virtually zero transportation costs, in money or energy, to distribute the biodiesel, since it will be piped across a street to Nelson's Carls Corner truck stop, which can handle the entire output of fuel.

That's the model, King said: local raw materials, local producers, local jobs, local investment and local sales.

"Our mantra is, all sustainability is local."

Annie Nelson is co-chairwoman of the SBA board of directors, along with entertainer Daryl Hannah.

Kelly King is vice chairwoman, Bob King is treasurer and Maui lawyer Ed Zwick is secretary.

Other members of a still-expanding board are Michael Bowman of 25 x 25 Group, Kent Bullard of the Los Angeles Coop, Edward Hsi of the Borneo Foundation, Suzanne Hunt of Worldwatch Institute, Laura Louie and Carolyn Mugar of FarmAid.

Eventually, King says, there will be two boards, a working board and the celebrity board that will help promote the alliance's program.

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