

Cheap gas anyone?

I want to share an interesting article I read from Austin, Texas, about a new program they launched called "Plug-In Austin." This is a community-wide campaign to promote the mass production of plug-in hybrid vehicles. Plug-in vehicles are not commercially available now, but Austin hopes to help create a market for them.

Plug-ins would combine today's new gas-electric hybrid technology with a larger battery that could be recharged in just a few hours by plugging it into a standard 120-volt wall socket. The battery would be sufficient to meet everyday commuting needs and could reduce annual gasoline consumption for many Americans by as much as 70 percent.

Plug-in hybrids help address two serious problems in America today, the over-reliance on imported oil and the need to improve air quality by reducing pollution from automobiles.

The appeal of plug-in vehicles is underscored by the fact that 78 percent of Americans live within 20 miles of their jobs. A battery pack sufficient to power a vehicle 35 miles on a charge would mean a majority of Americans would likely need to fill up with gasoline only once or twice a month. In addition, an "electric" gallon of gas would cost 50 to 78 cents at Klickitat PUD's electric rates.

Prototype plug-in hybrids are being tested now, as popular models of today's hybrids are being converted into plug-ins, although it will be at least a year before plug-in hybrids are available to the public. These first plug-ins will come in the form of adapter kits for existing hybrids.

A California company called Cal Cars has converted Toyota Priuses to plug-ins and has improved their gas mileage dramatically. The Prius, which has a city rating of 33 miles per gallon, has been logging 100 to 150 miles per gallon of gasoline after conversion to a plug-in.

Studies by the Electric Power Research Institute indicate after considering the lower costs of fuel and maintenance, a mass-produced plug-in hybrid should provide better overall economics than either a hybrid or a conventional vehicle.

I know many people here in Klickitat County drive more than 20 miles to work. A plug-in hybrid may make sense for your second car or even your everyday car, which doesn't need to make long, extended trips. Combined with renewable energy, a plug-in hybrid can make a huge difference in our environment. And, besides 50-cent gas, what's not to like?

Tom D. Svendsen, General Manager