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Biofueling across the country

Jeff Richgels — 7/14/2007 7:46 am

It's a summer vacation that combines Al Gore and the Griswolds.

Two years after their baby daughter was diagnosed with leukemia, the Jenkins family of Nampa, Idaho, is traveling the country in a 40-foot Gulfstream motor home powered by biodiesel, touting renewable energy while sightseeing and having fun.

"We're giving the kids a taste of the country, going to historical sites, visiting family and seeing renewable energy facilities," Christina Jenkins said via phone recently from Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore on Lake Michigan.

The brightly colored "Energy Aware Express" motor home can't be missed and the family also has a [Web site](#) touting all forms of renewable energy and their tour, which will bring them to the Madison area Tuesday.

Jenkins, who graduated from DeForest High School, said the family definitely will fill up at PrairieFire Biofuels Cooperative, 1894 E. Washington Ave. And they'll visit the area where Jenkins lived. But otherwise, their local itinerary is relatively unstructured.

"Although we're super organized, we're still trying to keep it somewhat a spontaneous family vacation," she said, adding that anyone who sees the motor home is welcome to chat with the family. "We're really glad to talk to people and educate them and get them excited about it."

The tour stems from Jessica's diagnosis in 2005, which not surprisingly had a profound impact on the Jenkins, who have three other children ages, 8, 7 and 4.

After almost two years of treatment, the family feels confident Jessica will beat the disease, although she has to go in for monthly chemotherapy treatments.

"After you have something that's that earth changing, it really makes you start to think," Jenkins said. "Renewable energy and the environment are things my husband and I have always had an interest in. I realized that this was something I could make a difference with and because of my child's illness and the difference that so many people made in my life it made me want to make a difference in other people's lives. So I was led to this, you might say."

Finding biodiesel fueling stations for their RV, which belongs to Taylor Jenkins' father, has been easy but finding the right kind has not.

"The biggest problem has been that most biodiesel is blended and the Midwest has lots of places with very low blends," she said. "It's better than nothing but we would like higher blends."

PrairieFire in Madison is one of the new places with 100 percent biodiesel, which currently is slightly less costly than gasoline, she noted.

Biodiesel is made from ethanol (fuel alcohol distilled from plant material), vegetable or animal oil (typically soybean, corn or restaurant grease) and lye, in a process similar to brewing. Using biodiesel results in substantial reduction in pollutants such as unburned hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide and particulate matter. In addition, the exhaust emissions of sulfur oxides and sulfates -- major components of acid rain -- are essentially eliminated compared to petroleum diesel.

"Any diesel engine can run on biodiesel," Jenkins said. "And I think lots of people don't know that or even have heard of biodiesel."

The ultimate goal of the tour is to get people involved.

"We really think the best way to bring about change is to create a community of like-minded people," she said. "Getting other people excited about renewable energy and biofuels like we are is the way to create change. We

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don't know everything about renewable energy either so we're trying to learn from people as we go and make contacts so we can share that knowledge through our Web site. It's a mission of educating other people but getting an education ourselves, too."

The family's goal was to raise \$30,000 in sponsorship money to cover all their costs. They fell short but hope to do better in future years.

"We're kind of doing the northern United States this year and we'd like to do different sections in future years," Jenkins said. "Everyone needs to hear about renewable energy."

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