

## College to offer renewable energy program

**FIRST IN STATE: Yearlong seven-course program will begin next spring.**

By RINDI WHITE  
rwhite@adn.com

(03/31/09 17:18:34)

WASILLA -- Mat-Su College is gearing up to be home to a new line of classes aimed at making the college the first campus in the state to offer a renewable energy program.

A seven-course program filled with classes on applied physics, electrical and mechanical safety and other topics is being designed to start next spring at the college.

"What we're trying to do is have a one-year course which is going to be able to provide a lot of background to renewables and lead the way into further training," said Kat Keith, wind-diesel generation coordinator for the Alaska Center for Energy and Power, a University of Alaska-led effort. She is also a member of the steering committee helping create the program.

After completing the courses, students will get a certificate showing they completed the program, said Dan Mielke. As the career and technical education coordinator at Mat-Su College, Mielke helped launch the new program.

He said the 11-member steering committee will design curriculum over the summer. They hope to get approval from University of Alaska officials in the fall and be ready to teach courses next spring.

"We're developing course outlines. We're moving in the right direction," Mielke said.

University of Alaska Provost Mike Driscoll said the course fits into the university's goal of emphasizing renewable energy.

"Energy, generally, is one of the key issues facing Alaska, facing the country and facing the world. The university, from the president on down, has wanted to demonstrate that we care a lot about energy and its use in all sorts of ways," he said.

Students who complete the program would still need training from manufacturers to maintain and install specific systems like a wind turbine, Keith said. But the classes would help them analyze whether using wind or hydroelectric power is a good idea for their community, she said.

"In the smaller villages, maybe they have people that they trained and they know, but they want to have them learn more about renewables. An operator can get this training and understand resource assessment and how to incorporate it into their program," Keith said.

Mielke said an introductory course will give an overview of different ways to produce energy, including wind and solar systems, small hydroelectric plants, biofuels and using geothermal energy.

The importance of conservation will also be a key part of the curriculum.

"I'm adamant about conservation. To me it makes no sense to waste energy and then seek other sources," he said.

The program grew out of a community-interest course held each year that discussed renewable power sources, Mielke said.

"The discussion came up of, shouldn't we do a little more, to try and be there leading and training people for that transition from fossil fuels to other sources," he said. "Everywhere we turned, there seemed to be a need and interest."

The steering committee started meeting last winter when energy prices were at their peak. Everyone was talking about the need to move to renewables to save money, he said. Now that energy costs are lower, the discussion has become one of sustainability.

"You will not save money if you put a solar panel on your roof and try to generate electricity. But then you get into the long-term questions of how fast are we depleting our fossil fuels ... it's not solely an economic issue," he said.

Mielke added that today's relatively low energy prices are driven more by the economic recession than by actual production costs.

"I don't think anybody believes that 10 to 15 years from now we're going to have cheap fossil fuel," he said.

Mark Masteller, director of the Mat-Su-based nonprofit Alaska Center for Appropriate Technology, said the demand for renewable heat and power is becoming a mainstream focus, instead of being a fringe issue.

The demand for turnkey systems and companies to install those systems is increasing, he said.

"About three years ago, I started getting more and more calls from people who said 'I want this stuff, but I don't want to do it myself,'" Masteller said.

Previously installing home wind turbines or solar panels was the realm of science-minded homeowners who committed time and resources to learning how to operate and maintain the systems, he said.

The program will focus on larger systems that will power villages or add to an existing power grid, not systems small enough for use in private homes.

But Mielke said the committee is discussing making a few courses broad enough to apply to homeowners as well.

---

Find Daily News reporter Rindi White online at [adn.com/contact/rwhite](http://adn.com/contact/rwhite) or call 352-6709.

Print Page

Close Window

Copyright © Thu Jul 09 2009 10:35:23 GMT-0800 (Alaskan Daylight Time) 1900 The Anchorage Daily News (www.adn.com)