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Bennington College goal: carbon neutrality

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Tuesday October 11, 2011

DAWSON RASPUZZI

Staff Writer

BENNINGTON -- Bennington College and its students have long prided themselves for their environmental efforts, and on Tuesday the college took another step in that direction by signing the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment.

With President Elizabeth Coleman's signature at a special reception Tuesday evening, Bennington College made a commitment to become carbon neutral by 2030.

The college joined 670 other institutions that have pledged carbon neutrality, which can be achieved by eliminating net greenhouse gas emissions or minimizing emissions and using carbon off-sets to mitigate the remaining emissions.

The private college in Bennington has 19 years to become carbon neutral, but steps are planned along the way to get there. A short-term goal has been set to reduce its carbon footprint 15 percent by 2015.

In recent years Bennington College has been doing the legwork to join the national commitment. A student took on the responsibility of taking the first step by conducting a greenhouse gas emissions inventory of the college three years ago.

Looking at stationary sources on campus, the college's largest emissions come from about 15 percent of the campus buildings that are not connected to a wood-chip biomass heating system installed in 2008. Campus buildings not connected to the system include some faculty housing, some of the newer

dorms and a couple others.

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"That's going to be our most significant challenge, to transfer those buildings onto different energy sources," said Valerie Imbruce, the college's environmental studies director, who has been closely involved in the comprehensive plan to reach carbon neutrality.

Ideas to reduce emissions in those buildings include extending biomass steam lines to them if possible or installing geothermal or wood-pellet heating systems.

There have been great benefits from the biomass system in the buildings the wood-chip system does heat, which alone has reduced emissions on campus 40 percent.

The college has also considered solar energy or purchasing energy from a hydroelectric dam that William Scully, a Bennington College graduate, hopes to get in operation in the future at the former Vermont Tissue Paper site.

Commuting is another area in which the college hopes to reduce emissions. Having done a transit study last year, Imbruce said the majority of faculty live within a 15-mile radius and most students live on campus. Bennington College will continue to encourage carpooling and the use of Green Mountain Express when possible. A "car share" program is also being considered.

An area where it will be more difficult to reduce emissions concerns guest lecturers. The college plans to increase its reliance on video conferences, although it is not ready to put an end to guest lectures that contribute to the educational experience and often attract experts from every part of the country, and even world.

"Certainly, because of the educational value and because of the nature of living in a rural place where there's no public transportation ... we can't reduce all of our travel," Imbruce said. "The way most schools deal with it, and the way we're talking about dealing with it, is off-sets."

Their are fears for the longevity of many carbon off-setting projects, although to attain carbon neutrality the college will have to purchase some off-sets. Investing in Vermont ideas such as Central Vermont Public Service's Cow Power program is one option being considered. The college is also doing an inventory to calculate what the carbon dioxide sequestration may be for 200 acres of forest it owns.

In addition to helping the environment, Imbruce said signing the commitment is also a great teaching opportunity and way for the college to lead by example.

"We're teaching our students about the issue of climate change and it's all encompassing," Imbruce said. "It touches upon our politics, economics and our personal lifestyles."

The ACUPCC was founded by 12 college presidents in 2006. Since that time, six Vermont institutions in addition to Bennington College have signed on, including Castleton State College, Goddard College, Green Mountain College, Middlebury College, School for International Training and the University of Vermont.

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