

SOL WEST Renewable Energy Fair



2000

Richard Perez

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What makes folks travel for hundreds, even thousands, of miles to spend the weekend talking renewable energy with others? An energy fair, that's what!

While John Day is a small town located in the middle of eastern Oregon, it is well on its way to becoming a mecca for RE enthusiasts. SolWest 2000 drew over a thousand folks from sixteen states and Canada. They came from as far away as Massachusetts, New York, Vermont, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Illinois.

Second Year in a Row!

Getting an energy fair to happen just once is an accomplishment. Getting it to happen a second time, and having the event surpass the first, is a supreme accomplishment.

Jennifer Barker and her crew of SolWest workers pulled it off again this year on July 29th and 30th, and bettered their first event. If you were there, I hope these pictures will bring back fond memories. If you didn't attend SolWest 2000, here's what you missed.

A Great Meal is the Way to Begin

I've attended over fifty energy fairs in the last ten years. Most start with an exhibitors' dinner. Out of all these

fairs, I must say that SolWest has the best food. And SolWest's "networking dinner" is open to anyone who is interested, not just exhibitors.

The day before the fair began, Joe Schwartz, Eric Hansen, and I went to Jennifer and Lance Barker's homestead, Morning Hill Forest Farm. Their place is amazing. Jennifer and Lance run their homestead without fossil fuels. The only gas consumers are their vehicles and a chainsaw. Everything else runs on solar and wood. They have no backup generator and use no propane on their remote mountain homestead. I've asked them to write an article about their homestead for publication in *Home Power*.

One main feature at this homestead are Lance's gardens. Considering the 5,000 foot (1,525 m) plus elevation, these gardens are more than amazing, they border on impossible. Almost all the vegetables served at the SolWest networking dinner came from Lance's gardens. As we wandered through these extensive gardens, Lance introduced us to each of the many veggies scheduled for the dinner.

These healthy and beautiful veggies, coupled with locally raised organic beef, made for the best exhibitors' dinner I've ever attended. Many thanks to Lance Barker for sharing the fruits of his herculean labors with the SolWest attendees.

Featured Speakers

Randy Udall from the Community Office for Resource Efficiency (CORE) in Aspen, Colorado was the keynote speaker on Saturday. His use of humor in his slides and examples brought home the point that we have to be serious about examining our energy use and sources. Randy is an accomplished speaker—he left his listeners inspired.

John Perlin, author of *From Space to Earth: the Story of Solar Electricity*, was the keynote speaker on Sunday. John explored the history of man's use of solar energy and solar electricity. Also a featured speaker both Saturday and Sunday was Steve Roberts of Nomadic Research Labs. Steve discussed what he terms "Technomadics" with SolWest fairgoers.

Workshops

One of the reasons energy fairs are so popular is the workshops. Workshops offer folks the opportunity to learn about renewable energy technologies and how to use them. No matter the topic, SolWest had a workshop on the subject, each taught by a hands-on expert. In all, there were 33 workshops during the fair, covering solar heat, PV, net metering laws, solar tax credits, fuel cells, wind power, inverters, batteries, and more.



photo by Heather Sheedy, courtesy of the Blue Mountain Eagle

Windy Dankoff teaches solar water pumping.

Exhibitors

The heart and soul of any energy fair are the exhibitors. They are the folks teaching the workshops and meeting you one on one at the booths. Most exhibitors are by necessity commercially oriented—they must make sales at a fair in order to survive and return again the next year. While the crowd at SolWest 2000 was not large, they were serious about going home with RE gear to install. They came with checklists and checkbooks.



Top: Sunelco and Kyocera talk solar.

Center: Solar Depot does the same.

Bottom: Oregon Office of Energy helps you pay for it.

Bob Maynard of Energy Outfitters told me that he sold out by 11 AM on Saturday. The folks at Sunelco said that they sold more RE gear at SolWest than in their previous four fairs combined. I saw many fairgoers carting equipment out to their cars. This commercial aspect of energy fairs is wonderful. What's the use of knowing the technology without the hardware necessary to actually use RE? Users got great deals



Steve Roberts and his Microship.



with fair specials, and exhibitors went home with full wallets and empty trucks.

Not all of the exhibitors were commercial. Some were purely informational. For example, the State of Oregon had a booth explaining to folks about the RE tax credits in Oregon. An exhibitor that really caught my attention was Steve Roberts and his Technomadics research.

GoPower!

I first ran into Steve at the first SEER fair in Willits, California in August, 1990. Steve was astride his totally wired bike. This bike had most every two-way radio possible, and several computers too. It was all solar and pedal powered. It was totally nuts, and Steve had already put thousands of miles on the rig.

Steve is a technical wanderer. His chosen fields are electronic technology and the surface of this planet—he wanders both. His dream is total free mobility with a fast Internet connection. Steve's bike was just the beginning—now he's into water. Steve and his partner Natascha were at SolWest displaying their Microships.

These live-aboard, 17 foot (5 m) sailing trimarans are the most intensely and tightly engineered boats I've ever seen. They have three motive sources—sail, pedal, and solar-electric. They even have retractable wheels for easy, damage-free beaching. They have almost every known form of radio communication aboard. All this communications gear talks to multiple onboard computers. If Steve's wired bike was nuts, these microships are from another planet. While we discussed sailing, PV, radio communications, and computers, I marveled at the experience. Where else but at an energy fair can you meet and talk to such people?



Christopher Dymond demonstrates the Honda Insight.

More GoPower!

Christopher Dymond of the Oregon Office of Energy was at SolWest with the OOE's new Honda Insight hybrid electric vehicle. Christopher gave me a ride and it was quiet, smooth, and fast. Christopher drove the vehicle from Salem, Oregon to John Day. This is a long trip over several mountain passes. He averaged 72 miles (116 km) per gallon of gas. He said he turned off the air conditioner only while climbing hills....

If the 100 degree heat made you lethargic, there's nothing like a car race to wake you up. SolWest had Electrathon racing. See Eric Hansen's article following this one for a report on the excitement. Eric actually drove in the race. Joe and I tried to be Eric's pit crew, but armed only with two Leathermans, two hours warning, and no spares, I'm afraid we weren't much help.

Fantastic Fun

No one would go to these fairs if they were a drag. These fairs are the finest form of fun. The fairgoers get their questions answered, and they get great deals on equipment. All the exhibitors get to talk shop. Everyone, yes everyone, learns more than a few new things. At night the distinction between exhibitor and attendee blurs. Everyone gathers around a common light. The solar-powered daiquiris flow. Hopes and wishes take on form. Music and song rises. If you weren't there, you really missed something.

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SolWest 2001, July 28–29, Grant County Fairgrounds, John Day, Oregon

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