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Steger advocates renewable energy

By FRITZ BUSCH Journal Staff Writer

ST. PETER — A native Minnesotan turned Arctic explorer toured renewable energy sites in Southern Minnesota Monday.

He said rural producers can combat global warming and make themselves more profitable if they want to bad enough.

“We could be energy independent in 30 years if we put our minds to it,” Will Steger said before touring 2,900-cow Northern Plains Dairy and its two-cell methane digester.

Earlier in the day, Steger toured a Luverne ethanol plant, the Minn-Wind Biodiesel Peaking Plant at Beaver Creek and a 1.5 MW wind turbine on the Jim Nichols farm near Lake Benton.

The tour focused on raising awareness about the need to combat global warming by using energy sources including ethanol, wind power, biodiesel and methane digesters.

Steger said during his two decades of exploring the Arctic, he’s seen the devastation created by global warming and that it’s time to get serious about dealing with the issue.

He added that locally-owned, renewable energy creates great economic opportunities for farmers and their communities while bringing cleaner air and energy independence to the nation.

Due to high costs, geothermal and fuel cell technology energy are huge industries yet to be developed, but will be in the future, according to Steger.

Meanwhile, the hum of chimney fans at Northern Plains Dairy was the most noticeable aspect of the dairy operation. There was no strong smell of manure.

Manure digesters produce methane gas from the dairy’s Jersey cows. The gas is burned in two Caterpillar engines to produce 6,000 KW hours of electricity per day.

The electricity is sold to Great River Energy in Elk River.

Each cow produces two KW of electricity and 15 gallons of manure per day.

Digesters remove solids from the manure. The cakelike material is used for cow bedding.

The dairy produces 140,000 pounds (three truckloads) of milk each day.

Manager Mitch Davis said the dairy can’t expand at its current site due to county restrictions.

The firm would like to add a dry-bed dairy cow facility about 10 miles north in New Sweden Township.

“I’d like to see more dairy operations in this county, and I think farmers would too because we could help lower their transportation costs,” said Davis. “We’d pay them the same amount for their corn, but they could lower their costs by hauling corn to us instead of taking it to Savage.”

Steger was given the 2006 Lindberg Award for his explorations, environmental understanding and efforts to raise awareness of environmental threats, especially climate change.

His tour was sponsored by the Minnesota Natural Legacy Campaign (MNLC) and Minnesota Project which focuses on agriculture, water, local food and renewable energy.

The MNLC is a group of community leaders who realize that stopping global climate change will create economic opportunity and preserve Minnesota’s natural heritage.

For more information, visit www.mnlegacy.com and www.mnproject.org

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