

Snohomish County reveals plans for biofuel R&D center at Paine Field

Mar 28, 2023, 11:36pm PDT



Anthony Bolante | PSBJ

Plans for the new research and development center at Paine Field include offices, labs and other spaces.

Snohomish County revealed plans Tuesday for a new research and development facility for sustainable aviation fuels at Paine Field.

The center would be in collaboration with Washington State University and also include a repository for biofuels.

The county, which owns Paine Field, would likely establish the repository in an existing building while it develops the new 12,000-square-foot center. Plans for call for offices, labs and other spaces.

"This R&D Center for Sustainable Aviation Fuels is a foundational component of our long-term commitment to generate new jobs in environmentally sustainable sectors and help decarbonize aviation," County Executive Dave Somers said in a news release.

The county cited Boeing's nearby commercial aircraft production as a key factor in the decision to locate the center at Paine Field.

The Washington state Senate's proposed transportation budget includes \$6.5 million in initial funding for the project.

The biofuels repository is the "most immediate need," said the county, and the part that could be set up first. At the repository, samples of biofuels — which are made from organic waste like agricultural or timber byproducts, or municipal solid waste — would be tested and catalogued. The R&D center would study methods to lower production costs, increase safety and facilitate large-scale distribution of the fuels.

While the county estimated that greenhouse gas emissions from aviation fell 23% over the past eight years, it said aviation still accounted for around 5% of the county's total carbon emissions output.

Sustainable aviation fuel is in high demand from airlines and other commercial jet operators as a near-term solution to reduce their carbon footprint. But biofuels currently make up only around a tenth of a percent of total jet fuel consumption, according to estimates by the International Air Transport Association, and typically cost two to six times as much as fossil fuels.

Sen. Marko Liias, D-Everett, proposed the funding for the center.

The center will "put us in a place to lead the world in shaping the future of clean aviation," he said in the news release. "This center will play a vital role in reducing the environmental impact of air

travel, while also fostering innovation and economic growth right here in Snohomish County.”

Project partner WSU leads the Federal Aviation Administration’s Aviation Sustainability Center in a joint venture with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It has also worked with the Port of Seattle to study the availability of raw materials in the Pacific Northwest, as well as the potential to retrofit existing industrial developments to produce, refine and distribute the fuels.

The state Legislature is expected to vote on the transportation budget in the coming weeks, the county said. A request for qualifications for a contractor to develop a business plan for the center will soon be released, with the plan to be developed by September.