Today's ideas, tomorrow's energy

Students tackle sustainability challenges during Boeing-sponsored contest

Terry Mutter, environmental strategy director at Boeing, speaks to high school students participating in the annual Imagine Tomorrow competition at Washington State University about the importance of applying creative ideas to solve environmental challenges. (Washington State University photo)

Students explain their sustainable energy ideas to judges at the Imagine Tomorrow contest in Pullman, Wash. (Washington State University photo)

New sources for sustainable biofuels, reimagining the electric car and an energy-saving shower were among the winning ideas at the recent Imagine Tomorrow contest – an annual Boeing-sponsored competition that challenges high school students to find innovative ways to create a more sustainable, fuel-efficient future.

For more than half a decade, students from Washington state, Oregon, Idaho and Montana have gathered at Washington State University in Pullman, Wash., to present their ideas to industry professionals. Some students come from rural areas, traveling hundreds of miles to compete. For many, it’s their first time on a university campus.

“The exciting aspect of Imagine Tomorrow is that it demonstrates how everyone can be part of developing solutions to the grand challenges faced by society,” said Grant Norton, chair of Imagine Tomorrow’s faculty committee and dean of Washington State’s Honors College. “Creating a sustainable energy future is probably the No. 1 global issue because it impacts the lives of everyone.”

Boeing has sponsored the competition since its inception and brings dozens of employees each year to help judge the more than 100 student projects on hand.

“Boeing is an important corporate partner for Imagine Tomorrow, not only because it is an honor to be associated with the largest aerospace company in the world, but also
because of the wonderful dedication and commitment of Boeing employees who generously give of their time and expertise as Imagine Tomorrow judges,” Norton said.

Projects fall within four categories: technology, design, behavior and biofuels. Entries are judged based on creativity, thoroughness and presentation.

“I am constantly impressed with the quality and viability of the solutions the students come up with every year,” said Terry Mutter, Boeing environmental strategy director and industry chair for the challenge.

Mutter emphasized the role the competition plays in getting high school students interested in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). This is particularly important for women, who are underrepresented in STEM disciplines, he noted. Female students typically comprise more than half of contest participants.

“Boeing understands how important it is to find solutions for important environmental challenges such as developing sustainable biofuels,” Mutter said. “Imagine Tomorrow inspires and prepares the next generation to be the thinkers and innovators we need to solve these challenges.”

First-place winning teams in each category took home $1,000 for each student competitor and $5,000 for each school represented. As an additional prize, the team with the winning biofuels project was invited to visit the U.S. Department of Energy in Washington, D.C., later this year. Awards also honored the best entries from schools competing for the first time.

To learn more about Imagine Tomorrow and see the complete list of participants, visit the Imagine Tomorrow website.

By Joanna Pickup