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Fuel" Filmmaker Josh Tickell Finds the "Wow" in Algae

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Filmmaker Josh Tickell talks about "Fuel," a new documentary chronicling America's dependence on oil — and alternatives for the future.

I can't remember the last time I was so excited about algae.

Consider: Algae can yield a biodiesel fuel so clean it's edible. And it grows in vast amounts very quickly.

What's more, according to filmmaker Josh Tickell's "Fuel," the United States could meet all its energy needs by dedicating 2 percent of its land mass to algae-fuel production.

Wow. And algae is just the tip of the clean-energy-sources-you've-never-heard-of iceberg explored in this movie. There are many more in "Fuel," a documentary that might, only a year ago, have been spitting in the prevailing wind of America's costly and destructive oil addiction.

But at this moment in the nation's history, with so many people experiencing a postelection sense of hope that yes — or at least maybe — we can rescue ourselves economically and environmentally, "Fuel," opening at the Varsity Friday, arrives at a propitious moment.

"The film was 11 years in the making, and turned out to be part of the zeitgeist," says Tickell, the day after a recent Seattle preview and panel discussion that included Congressman Jay Inslee.

"The move toward clean, renewable energy has been brewing a long time," Tickell says. "A lot of ordinary people — patriots — want it to happen. In order for the U.S. to move forward there has to be honesty. We have a bankrupt economy. We are losing the race to become sustainable through green energy. We're one of the few countries that do not reconcile lifestyle with environmental impact. We all need to understand what we're changing from in order to change into something better."

"Fuel" is partially focused on the historical synergy between the fortunes of oil companies and those of a U.S. auto industry that has long favored gas-guzzlers. Tickell explains in the film how the U.S. government has been subsidizing the production of sport-utility vehicles, but not more fuel-efficient cars, for years, ensuring that oil demand would remain high.

"Fuel" is the successor to "Fields of Fuel," a shorter work that won the Sundance Film Festival's 2008 Audience Award for Best Documentary. Tickell began filming in 1997 while driving his biodiesel-powered "Veggie Van" around the country and gaining press notice. (The van will motor into Seattle this week.) His passion for clean energy is rooted in childhood experience.

"I grew up in Louisiana and watched people suffer from pollution," Tickell says, referring to the environmental impact of the state's oil and oil-based biochemical industries. "I made a short film that played at festivals and was encouraged to turn it into a feature. It was an evolving, organic process that captured the growth of clean-energy research and development as well as public awareness."

The film's lengthy creation can also be seen, to positive effect, in the production itself. As years went by, "Fuel" adopted new filmmaking technologies, especially in powerful graphics.

"I really respect Josh and his team for their commitment," says Inslee, who is interviewed in "Fuel." "They've been at this for years. It was a lonely position. Josh's personal story and steely purpose are inspiring. A movie of this nature is worth its weight in gold, making people aware of how capable we are."

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