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Hearth & Home

Harvesting Heat

For 18 years, Mike Haefner has been promoting the benefits of burning corn.

In Takoma, Maryland, a town of approximately 18,000 people, at least a few residents take the issue of household heating very seriously. So seriously, in fact, those 10 families purchased corn stoves, and then formed a cooperative to buy and erect a corn silo to hold 21 tons of fuel.

This past January, a few dozen folks showed up to watch the mayor cut a wide red ribbon celebrating the town's newest equipment (for insurance reasons, the cooperative gave the silo to the town).

Mike Tidwell was a catalyst for the project. He directs the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, an environmental organization. When Tidwell started burning corn last winter, he had to make frequent trips out to a farm (40 miles) because he didn't have enough storage space for the corn he needed.

So he asked the manufacturer of his corn stove for a grant to purchase a silo. Michael Haefner, president of American Energy Systems, agreed and provided $3,000 for the project. Total cost of the project was $9,000. Tidwell's environmental group contributed funds as did the other individuals; the city provided the land on which the silo was constructed.

The state of Maryland also encourages corn burning by waving the sales tax for residents who buy corn stoves. "We have corn storage and corn delivery projects going on around the U.S., and have for the past 10 years." Says Mike Haefner, president and owner of American Energy Systems, Hutchinson, Minnesota. "We are spearheading projects where farmers deliver corn and provide storage bins, or pour it right into holding areas in basements."

Haefner has been manufacturing and selling corn stoves for 18 years. Actually, he calls them multi-fuel stoves, because they are capable of burning cherry pits, olive pits, wheat, oats, barley, and high ash wood pellets (3 to 5% ash).

For years hearth dealers shunned the concept, and the reality, of corn stoves. So Haefner had to set up an alternate network of dealers. "Now we're getting calls from the traditional hearth dealers," he says, "because those alternative dealers are taking business away from them."

The same was true of manufacturers. They neglected corn stoves for years. "Now that sales of corn stoves are taking off, manufacturers are jumping in without doing the necessary R&D," says Haefner.

"It just burns me up to see some of the stuff that's out there right now," he says. "This is a very unique industry. You wouldn't take a gas engine and say that is can burn diesel just as well. Well, a number of manufacturers have just taken the label saying Don't Burn Corn off their pellet stove. Now they say it can burn corn. That's the kind of thing that can really hurt this industry."

Haefner declines to state the number of corn stoves he sells each year. He does say that he has 39 employees, and that, when he started reporting his numbers to the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association a few years ago (they went in under the pellet stove designation), the numbers in the category spiked; over a third of the sales in that category were ours."

According to Haefner, the Midwest and East are the strongest areas in the country for corn stove sales. "Corn in the West is very expensive," he says. "They would rather go to wood pellets. The southern regions are catching on."

Up in Takoma, Mike Tidwell is sold on the concept of corn stoves. He believes that the long-term savings will win over all sorts of people. "I would not have bought a corn stove to begin with, or worked this hard to create a cooperative and have an urban corn silo, if I thought that this idea was going to remain in Tacoma Park. "We are early adopters and we are showing that this is a good idea, that it's practical, it can be integrated into a modern lifestyle, it can save money and, oh, by the way, it helps stops global warming."

According to Tidwell, the cooperative will keep 100,000 pounds of CO2 out of the atmosphere over the next year. He expects many others will join the cooperative, perhaps enough to require a second silo.