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Campers Get Look At Cutting Edge Hydrogen Fuel



Angellica Harvey of West Haven, center, asks John Koopman III a question Wednesday during a tour of Proton Energy Systems in Wallingford. Harvey, an eighth-grader at Carrigan Middle School, was taking part in the Connecticut Kids for Fuel, a two-week camp focusing on sustainable energy. (Cloe Poisson, Hartford Courant / July 8, 2009)

By Zeke Miller
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WALLINGFORD - Nearly 100 Connecticut middle school students got a firsthand look Wednesday at a promising new technology that might provide new sources of renewable energy.

The schoolchildren were touring Proton Energy Systems as part of the Connecticut Kids for Fuel program, a two-week camp that teaches seventh- and eighth-graders about sustainable energy initiatives.

The interest shown by the children and the upbeat nature of the event was a positive sign for Proton, which less than a year ago had been put up for sale under the bankruptcy proceedings of its parent company, Distributed Energy Systems Corp.

Since its acquisition for \$10.2 million by **Tom Sullivan**, founder of Toano, Va.-based Lumber Liquidators, Proton Energy, which specializes in hydrogen generation by water electrolysis, has shifted away from grand applications of the fuel toward more focused industrial and defense applications.

The move has brought the company to "near profitability," said President and CEO Robert Friedland, while allowing it to pay for continued research and development.

With more than 70 employees — eight have been added in the past year — the company is pursuing a strategy of cautious growth by following the market demand for its high-technology water electrolyzers, which produce hydrogen and oxygen gas.

The company provides and supports 1,700 hydrogen generation systems in 58 countries. The hydrogen produced by its systems can be stored and used as fuel for cars, in backup power systems and in industrial cooling.

It was the application as a motor fuel that drew the students to Proton for presentations and a factory tour led by company executives and engineers. Students donned safety glasses as they navigated the factory floor to examine products under construction and learn about hydrogen generation.

Larry Moulthrop, vice president for hydrogen systems, said the company encourages educational events and holds four or five a year.

"We believe in what we do," he said, "and we believe that we have to educate our children about the world around them. For their generation, one of the most pressing issues will be energy, and we feel we have one piece of the total solution."

Moulthrop said the company's efficient hydrogen production and storage method has the potential to make the company a key player in moving the country's energy supply away from fossil fuels.

"The problem with many renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind, is that they can only produce power when the sun is out or when the wind is blowing," he said. "You can produce hydrogen during the day, and convert it to electricity at night, providing a consistent source of green energy."

Friedland said that in coming years Proton, which currently generates \$15 million in revenue annually, hopes to expand along with the market for its products.

"We see the market expanding," he said. "In five years we hope to be a \$100 million company with a few hundred employees and a couple of factory shifts."

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