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Partying to Biodiesel

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Thousands of revelers that got their groove on this week at the Burning Man festival did so partly courtesy of biodiesel.

Much has been written of the solar arrays that powered the effigy of the "man" at this year's edition of the annual art-meets-tech bacchanalia called Burning Man in the remote desert of Nevada, which concluded this weekend.

But not everybody was necessarily aware of the extent to which biodiesel was used this year at the festival.

There were still hydrocarbons being spewed aplenty by art cars and recreational vehicle air conditioners this year, but one high profile place renewable energy made its mark was in the massive generator powering the thumping electronica of one of the event's most popular dance venues.

The Root Society theme camp that anchors one of the two prime dance locations at Burning Man is the ongoing passion and undertaking of Jeff Taylor, founder and onetime CEO of Monster.com.

For five years running, now, Taylor and some 80 friends have built a series of structures that host thousands of dance music enthusiasts every night of the week-long festival.

"We're the Niagara Falls of dance camps at Burning Man," opined Taylor to Cleantech.com.

This year, the music systems and lighting in Taylor's elaborate domes, measuring 30, 60 and 90 feet in diameter, were powered by an industrial generator producing 2.5 kilowatts, driven by a B30 blend of biodiesel (30 percent biodiesel and 70 percent gasoline.)

"We'd run 100 percent biodiesel, but that would have required modifying the generator, and it's a rental," said Taylor. "Others here, however, are running 100 percent biodiesel."

Indeed, many of the generators rented by Burning Man organizers to power shared facilities, such as those at the facility's Center Camp, were powered by 100 percent biodiesel.

Exact figures were unavailable immediately, but one of the event's electrical planners estimated the generators would consume between 15 and 20-thousand gallons of fuel, sourced mostly from suppliers in Nevada.

Taylor and his Root Society group also made use of solar, though not to power their party.

A United Solar Ovonic thin film-based solar array on a carport rooftop structure, loaned by Envision Solar (Taylor and Envison CEO Bob Noble were Harvard business school buddies) powered lights for 17 teepee structures housing Taylor and his 80 or so friends and crew.

Rather than parking cars in Envision's carport, however, the Root Society built a wooden kitchen into it to make it into useable space.

"It's the staging area for our food. It's also kind of like our chill space," said Taylor.

Taylor's Root Society camp is one of dozens at the festival that incorporated renewable energy technologies into their elaborate art and performance projects this year. Solar panels, in particular, abounded on the desert playa where Burning Man is held.

"Burning Man is the juxtaposition of the old and the new, the future," noted Taylor.

How much did the youthful multi-millionare spend on his Root Society Burning Man presence?

"The amount of dollars it takes to put on a great party," said Taylor. "Burning Man is a gift economy. This is my gift."

Displays scattered throughout Burning Man also quietly showcased unbranded clean technology products from vendors like Tesla Motors, Kyocera Solar, various wind turbine vendors and others for the review of festival-goers.

"I think it's a great way to draw attention to latest important clean technology breakthroughs in a low key way," said Envision's Noble, despite the controversy this year to let commercial vendors show products at the long-time countercultural event.

A panel discussion series brought noted scientists together over several days with representatives from companies such as LiveFuels, Benefuel, Cleantech Network, Inside Greentech and others. The series probed topics such as waste from energy, CO2 sequestration with algae, green building and distributed biofuel generation.

The festival concluded today.