UK one of 20 finalists in solar home contest

05:09 PM EST on Sunday, February 17, 2008

LEXINGTON, Ky. (AP) -- The task is to build an 800-square-foot house, but there’s one major catch. No electricity is allowed.

A team from the University of Kentucky is one of 20 chosen to compete in next year’s Solar Decathlon, a prestigious contest sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy.

Students are required to build a home that not only runs entirely on solar energy but also is mobile—able to be transported to the National Mall in Washington, where they will be judged in fall 2009.

Greg Luhan, an associate dean for research at UK’s College of Design who is among three faculty members leading the effort, said the university’s entry could potentially involve hundreds of students from six colleges and 16 departments.

After all, this contest involves far more than engineering expertise. The houses will be judged in 10 areas, including architecture, market viability, hot water and comfort.

UK kicked off its project earlier this month by soliciting suggestions about how best to represent “native elements” that are useful to sustain development in Kentucky.

One audience member asked if coal would be included. Hilary Bryon, a lecturer for the College of Design, said carbon fibers—turning coal into something else—might be used.

Provost Kumble R. Subbaswamy, who attended the announcement, suggested that Kentucky was once a leading producer of hemp and that perhaps it should play a role.

The concept behind the Solar Decathlon is to explore and popularize solar technology while simultaneous providing hands-on training to students in a number of fields.

It’s a particularly timely subject for Kentucky, which gets most of its electricity from coal-fired generating plants, even as coal finds itself under attack because of pollution.

“Looking down the pike at climate change legislation, Kentucky has to diversify its energy sources,” said Talina Mathews, executive director of the Governor’s Office of Energy Policy.

Among the other universities in the 2009 contest at Virginia Tech, Pennsylvania State, Cornell and a university from Germany that won last year’s competition.

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