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Richard Branson hands euro500,000 environmental prize to Dutch startup to

By *TOBY STERLING* Associated Press Writer

Monday, October 1, 2007

AMSTERDAM, Netherlands (AP) — British billionaire Richard Branson handed over a euro500,000 (US\$700,000) environmental prize Saturday to fund a Dutch startup company called Qurrent BV, which has developed a system to reduce energy usage at the neighborhood level.

The winning idea was selected from among 400 participants in 50 countries and presented to a panel of judges including Branson and representatives from Greenpeace and others at the "Picnic" cross media conference in Amsterdam.

"What the world needs is ideas" like Qurrent's, Branson said, adding that his company Virgin Group plans to test a biofuel in a Boeing 747 sometime next year as part of a push to reduce pollution in the airline industry, one of the major sources of carbon emissions globally.

"Any volunteers?" for the test flight, Branson quipped.

Qurrent founder Igor Kluin, 34, described the company's strategy, which is to send information from participating households to a central computer to smooth usage peaks and troughs.

Consumers get cheaper electricity when they opt to let the computer decide when a task such as running a load of laundry or a dishwasher should be done.

In addition, Qurrent acts as a consultant to help households install solar panels, miniature wind turbines or other energy generators and rig them to feed electricity back into the grid at the best possible time to reduce their bill.

"What it does is make optimal use of the energy you create," Kluin said.

"My philosophy is you shouldn't lose any comfort or choice, so if you want to run your washing machine at a certain time, it's always possible. If you don't care about what time you run it, why not save a little money and reduce energy use in the process?"

Qurrent won a grant of euro250,000 (US\$350,000) in an innovation contest one year ago, which it used to develop the first generation of its product, the "Qbox," which sits in a house's fuse-box to monitor electricity usage and sends information to and from the central computer.

Kluin said a neighborhood has been selected "somewhere in the Netherlands" for a first pilot project which will be installed next year with funding from Saturday's grant.

As part of the prize, which was funded by the Netherlands' Postal Code Lottery, Qurrent will also receive consulting and accounting help.

"This came at exactly the right time for us," Kluin said.

Branson called on the United States and European Union to end tariffs on sugar, which he said is the best source of biofuel, and dismissed U.S. President George W. Bush's call for action on global warming Friday as "Eight years too late."

He praised the four other finalists and said he may be interested in funding some of them.

They were a "The Sustainable Dance Club" in Rotterdam, which uses spring generators underneath the dance floor to cut energy use; "Lampion," a solar-powered light resembling a pine-cone; "CityCargo," a project to reduce truck traffic in Amsterdam's city center; and "The Green Thing," an Internet activism site that launches Oct. 1, which Branson said he was interested in helping fund.

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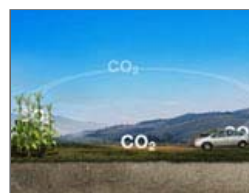


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