

Aran Islands target green energy

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The Sustainability Energy Authority of Ireland is undertaking a study into the use of electric cars on the Aran Islands. Photo: Andrew Downes

Driving electric cars, buying a wind farm and using energy-efficient domestic appliances are among the initiatives being examined by residents of the Aran Islands in a bid to become energy-independent within ten years.

The Aran Islands Energy Co-Op is working with Energy Co-Operatives Ireland on becoming a research and development hub for new energy technologies, and is in negotiations with a number of firms in a bid to get them to run technology trials on the islands.

A contract has already been signed for the trial of highly energy-efficient tumble dry-ers on Inis Mor, the largest of the three Aran Islands, and the Sustainability Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) is undertaking a study into the use of electric cars on the islands.

The local co-op also hopes to buy a windfarm in Inis Meáin built ten years ago, but never operational because of funding problems.

Pat Gill, an engineer on the technical team of Energy Co-operatives Ireland, said the Aran Islands community had come together in a joint effort because of the premium they pay for hydrocarbons like coal:

"The response has been great from every company I have phoned about this, be they boiler manufacturers or window producers.

"Kingspan Renewables, Senator Windows and Glen Dimplex have all expressed an interest," said Gill. "We are also hoping to trial a new Irish-designed liquid electrolyte battery in a local nursing home that is owned by the islanders."

Irish firm RedT is manufacturing the battery.

The company's chief executive, John Ward, said the islands were representative of Ireland on a small scale.

"Our battery is more like a power source in itself and has a very long life, but it can also be charged from solar or wind energy, so you could switch to one when you are not using the other," he said.

"We hope the island nursing home can be a test bed for it."

Pat Gill said that between 60 and 70 of the islands' 400 houses have had high-efficiency boilers installed with the help of SEAI grants.

There are also around 20 megawatts of wave energy that could be harnessed from the foreshore of these islands; at present one electric cable provides energy from the mainland, but this flow of energy could be reversed in time, according to Gill.

Cormac Walsh, spokesman for the Spirit of Ireland movement - of which Energy Co-Ops Ireland is an offshoot - said that other islands, such as Inishbofin, Inishturk or Achill, could replicate the Aran Islanders' efforts because of the similarities between them.