

## **Blue Ridge Biofuels Wins Break-Through Business Competition**

**Dale Neal, Asheville Citizen Times**  
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**FLETCHER** — Entrepreneurs advancing biofuels, bike repairs and nut butters have taken top awards in a break-through business competition.

The employee-owned Blue Ridge Biofuels won first place and \$5,000 in the first Blue Ridge Entrepreneurial Council Break-Through Business Challenge. Blue Ridge Biofuels collects and recycles used vegetable oil from local restaurants to create biodiesel for vehicles and home heating.

“The BREC Breakthrough Business Challenge is designed to assist small businesses and entrepreneurs with the key decision to get a company started or successfully move it to the next level,” said Matt Raker, vice president of entrepreneurship and the AdvantageGreen program at AdvantageWest.

Blue Ridge Biofuels used the mentoring and competition to hone plans for a new business opportunity bringing its supply chain closer to home, said Woodrow Eaton, the company’s managing partner.

Under the F3 program — Field to Fryer to Fuel Tank — Blue Ridge will work with local farmers to grow crops such as canola, which could be pressed into a food-grade oil that restaurants could use in their kitchens. Blue Ridge would then collect the oil to turn into biodiesel.

The BREC Challenge “was helpful, not only with the mentoring and classroom session but having the competition to work for,” Eaton said. “It was definitely good to have a professional third-party to critique the idea and the development of the plan.”

Shelley and Kevin Booth, of Suspension Experts, placed second in the competition, winning \$2,500. The couple run a shop that repairs suspension forks and other parts on high-end mountain bikes.

Jack Fischer and Michele Drivon, of Jack’s Nut Butters, placed third, winning \$2,500. Working out of Blue Ridge Food Ventures, they make and market natural butters blended from walnuts and almonds, honey and spices.

The three winning companies will present at Carolina Connect, AdvantageWest's annual conference for entrepreneurs slated for the summer.

More than 40 companies participated started taking courses in the program last fall. In December, 22 of those companies submitted their business plans in a competition. A panel of four independent judges with business experience in the region sorted through the entries in January.

"If you look at the top three winners, we had a business in the clean energy sector, an outdoor products company and a food product business, which is really representative of the entrepreneurial energy we have in this region," Raker said.

The program was sponsored by AdvantageWest and Tech 20/20, an entrepreneurial support group in Knoxville, Tenn., and funded through a grant from the Citi Foundation.