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Contact

Melissa Weber, Director of Communications  
Phone: 320-589-6414, weberm@morris.umn.edu

Jenna Ray, Editor/Writer  
Phone: 320-589-6068, jrray@morris.umn.edu

**Free Solar Swim celebrates solar-thermal panels at the Regional Fitness Center**

*Summary: Everyone is invited for a February 12 winter swim in water heated by the sun.*

(February 2, 2011)-The 32-panel solar-thermal array installed this summer at the Regional Fitness Center (RFC), a facility shared among the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM), Stevens County residents, and the Morris school district, has already proven to be a campus-community asset, providing additional green energy to heat the recreational pool. Wayne Morford, RFC director, reports that the pool's water temperature is a few degrees warmer and utility bills are lower, directly related to when the system came online. To mark these achievements, the Students Using Natural Energy (SUN-E) team responsible for this project is gearing up for the first annual solar swim.

Organizers Seth Elsen '12, Shelton, Washington, and Melinda Kawalek '13, Eagan, working with Karen Mumford, assistant professor of environmental studies, and Troy Goodnough, sustainability coordinator, through the University's Center for Small Towns, are on a mission to influence the whole west central Minnesota region. They have crafted an exciting program of fun and facts showing residents that solar-thermal energy is a sustainable way to heat water.

Free solar swim events will be held Saturday, February 12, 2011. Free pizza will be served at both events.

Saturday encompasses a community event from 5 until 7 p.m. Patrick Santelli, Minnesota Schools Cutting Carbon (MNSCC) coordinator, will deliver the keynote address. A student swim from 8:30 until 11 p.m. rounds out the day. All other MNSCC schools have been invited to enjoy the day with their sister MNSCC institution and share their own green best practices.

The reality of a winter swim indoors in water heated by the sun would be incomplete without an educational aspect, and complementary projects are in production. With assistance from Dana Droog '11, Mobridge, South Dakota, a video documentary, recognizing the benefits of solar-thermal technology and tracing UMM's journey, including interviews with key players, will soon be ready for viewing. Students are also working on content for the Insolation Station, a customized informational kiosk at the RFC. Since it runs the same software as the green kiosk in the Welcome Center, real-time data on energy production and costs savings can be shown simultaneously at opposite ends of campus toward the goal of helping "people learn about solar-thermal energy and what it is doing for our campus and what it can do for them."

Like many of their UMM peers, Elsen and Kawalek are among the students who enrich both campus and community as they attain experiences that will prepare them for their life's work. Elsen pursues political science and American Indian studies. Affiliated with the Brothertown Indian Nation, he is interested in community and tribal politics and was attracted to the Center for Small Towns since his first campus visit. Aware that American Indians are one of the most underrepresented groups in the nation, he recognized UMM as a resource for his career aspirations. Before coming to UMM, Elsen founded a political consulting firm in his hometown devoted to all aspects of campaigning for progressive candidates. Involved since the age of 10, a role in tribal government and advocacy continue to define his future. Recent investments in renewable energy by many tribes give him an ideal niche.

Kawalek is an environmental studies and political science major. As a student in Karen Mumford's Environmental Problems and Policy course, she was encouraged to get involved in green initiatives, strengthening her belief that UMM lets students "design their own major and get the most out of it." Also an early starter, she has been active in environmental issues since the eighth grade, taking part in Minnesota Youth in Government and attending a four-day conference in which participants took a role in state government at the State House. Committed to the "concept of the outside," Kawalek intends to use "government to help preserve natural spaces" from environmental threats.

Join them and their colleagues in observing another milestone on the way toward UMM's energy transformation. Enjoy the warm water, have some fun, and learn more about solar-thermal energy and the emergent industry built on the oldest way of tapping power from the sun.

Funding for this project was provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).

Photo below: Organizers Seth Elsen '12, Shelton, Washington, and Melinda Kawalek '13, Eagan

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