

Daily Breeze

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Energetic start

Swiss doctor begins his across-the-U.S. walk in San Pedro

By Donna Littlejohn, Staff Writer



Martin Vosseler is trekking across the United States to... (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)



With a spring in his step and the sun on his back, Dr. Martin Vosseler set out from San Pedro on a 3,000-mile trek across America on Wednesday morning.

The goal: to raise awareness about the environment and the need for solar and other renewable energy sources.

The 59-year-old Swiss doctor and environmental activist started his walk from the Port of Los Angeles, where longtime friend S. David Freeman, president of the Los Angeles harbor commission, gave him an official send-off.

His first destination was Monrovia, where he was meeting up with other friends who would send him eastward, toward the California mountains and desert and then on into Arizona.

His coast-to-coast trek, called SUNwalk 2008, from San Pedro to Boston is expected to take six to eight months. Far from being a prophet of doom, Vosseler is upbeat about the world's growing awareness of environmental issues. He plans to share his concerns and hopes with people throughout America during his walk, which will take him through the mountainous west, the farms of Illinois, Indiana and Ohio and the big cities on the East Coast.

"In the last two years, awareness has improved," he said. "There's been astonishing growth in things like wind power."

This isn't Vosseler's first public demonstration for the environmental cause.

He walked from Switzerland to Jerusalem in 2003 and participated in Sun21, a 2007 transatlantic voyage on a solar-powered catamaran.

The son of a geographer and a nurse, Vosseler was a research fellow from 1980 to 1982 at Harvard Medical School in Boston. He also has a bachelor's degree in Greek and Latin.

He began his social activism in 1975, when he joined with others to oppose a nuclear power plant in Switzerland. In 1981, he founded the Swiss chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility.

His concern about nuclear weapons and energy eventually led to his focus on the environment.

Freeman, who shares Vosseler's commitment to improving the environment, said his friend's walk will make an impact.

"The real beauty of it is his example," Freeman said. "This man is devoting six months of his life. I think that's contagious and kind of inspiring."

Vosseler, who gave up driving a car in 1979 and travels between continents on container ships, is an avid walker and said a peripheral message he hopes to spread is that walking is a great way to get healthy. He said he walks about 4 mph.

A one-wheel cart strapped to his waist will carry his tent and other supplies behind him as he walks. The only technology he'll carry is a cell phone, a GPS device and a watch.

He'll pass the time he's alone by singing, praying, reciting poems and learning Russian.

"I will not have a boring moment," said Vosseler, who also is an artist and has written children's books.

Walking, he said, puts a person "close to the web of life. As people pass by, I'll send them good thoughts."

Although he does have some sponsors, including the company that makes his walking sandals, Vosseler said most of the trip is being bankrolled by his personal savings.

Freeman, who has led the push to clean up the polluting ships, trucks and trains in the Port of Los Angeles, said he and his friend of 25 years are working toward the same goals.

"In our own ways, we're on the same path," Freeman said.

Before Vosseler headed north along the port's new promenade, he and Freeman stopped to collect a bottle of harbor water that he'll carry with him to Boston.

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FIND OUT MORE WHAT: SUNwalk 2008, a 3,000-mile walk across America by Dr. Martin Vosseler of Switzerland to raise awareness for solar energy.

WHEN: Vosseler began his walk from San Pedro on Wednesday morning. He expects the entire trek to Boston will take six to eight months.

INFORMATION: Follow Vosseler at www.martinvosseler.ch.