

PASADENA STAR NEWS

From Frying Pan into Fuel Tank

Lack of supply at pumps means many users have to mix own fuel from frying oil.

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There are many reasons Jules Dervaes fuels his Chevrolet Suburban with biodiesel -- but convenience is not one of them. Every month Dervaes and his son Justin collect used frying oil from a local restaurant and cart it back to their Pasadena home. Wearing gloves and goggles they strain and heat the oil, and add precise amounts of lye and methanol. Mix. Wash. Settle. Dry.

Thirty hours later, they have 30 gallons of vegetable oil-based, low-toxicity, home-made petroleum diesel alternative.

For Southern California users like Dervaes, biodiesel is more than a fuel -- it's a lifestyle.

They're devotees willing to pay more, home-brew or drive hours in search of their fuel. They preach sustainability, cleaner cars and ending the nation's dependence on foreign fuel. "We feel it's worth the extra effort on our part. We feel like we're in a battle for our future and this is our salvo," Dervaes explained.

Despite avid users, Los Angeles is a biodiesel wasteland. There are no stations that sell 100 percent biodiesel, called B100, and only one station, in South Los Angeles, that sells a 20 percent biodiesel blend.

Instead, users must drive to Ventura County or arrange for a fuel company to deliver a tank of biodiesel. Or they home-brew, which is time-consuming and complicated for the beginner. Most folks would prefer to buy biodiesel from their local gas station.

Biodiesel is a vegetable oil-based fuel that can run in diesel engines. Much of the United States supply uses soybean and canola oil.

Compared to petroleum diesel, biodiesel produces less toxic soot and fewer emissions linked to acid rain and global warming.

But biodiesel produces more nitrogen oxides (NOx), a key ingredient in smog and particulate matter. That's one of the main reasons biodiesel has not caught on in smog-plagued Southern California.

While cities and school districts in Northern California have switched their fleets to biodiesel and created the demand for more biodiesel dealers, Southern California has strict air quality regulations that require public fleets buy low-emission natural gas equipment instead of diesel.

"It comes back to the emissions question. We have a very serious problem here that partly extends from NOx ... I don't think we can afford to encourage a technology that will increase NOx emissions," said Sam Atwood, spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

But biodiesel users expect new technology will reduce the NOx emissions below diesel levels. Indeed, biodiesel fans are hopeful their fuel of choice will become widely available in the near future.

Just last year the city of Santa Monica converted diesel dump trucks, refuse trucks and tractors to a 20 percent biodiesel blend.

Next year, automakers expect to unveil diesel passenger cars that can meet the strict air quality rules. Once Californians can buy new diesel cars in the state, they may seek out biodiesel as fuel.

With more customers and availability, biodiesel users hope the price will drop.

Joe Gershen, who runs a biodiesel distributor called LA Biofuel, said his family spends up to \$1,000 more per year for biodiesel compared to a gasoline-powered car.

"In my mind that's an OK amount to spend to not use petroleum."

He's trying to get a biodiesel pump installed in West Los Angeles so the alternative fuel would only be five to ten cents more expensive than diesel.

That would make life a lot easier for Silverlake tax preparer Steve Volpin. He recently switched to biodiesel and drives his Volkswagen Passat station wagon to Ventura.

"It's crazy that in a city the size of Los Angeles that there's not somebody selling B100."

A child of the 1960s and an environmentalist, Volpin said his biodiesel use is guilt-free motoring and a political statement, telling the oil companies to shove it.

"The thing I've discovered over the years is that you can talk to people till you're blue in the face. The best way to change people's way of thinking is to lead by example."