

Fuelish Pride

Biodiesel gaining in status and availability.

You've heard about them: the all-electric cars, the solar-powered cars, the hydrogen fuel-cell cars. Those fantasy cars that almost no one drives. You've been startled by the eerily silent hybrids, those popular gas-electric combos that get killer mileage. But you'd prefer a car that doesn't need gas at all. And you've heard about them, too. Because the veggie-car movement relies almost entirely on word of mouth to spread its message: Get a diesel car, and you'll never have to burn petroleum again.

No blanket campaigns, no advertising blitz. In Eugene, Dan Gorman was listening to the National Public Radio show "Car Talk" when a woman called in to ask about biodiesel. He's since acquired two diesel cars, and shares his vegetable-based fuel with a friend. Eugene residents Amy Beller and Kate MacQueen saw their neighbor driving a Volkswagen Golf with "Powered by Biodiesel" stickers on it. They were thinking about buying a hybrid, but changed their minds and purchased a brand-new diesel Golf instead.

This is the slow, sneaky allure of the movement: If the neighbor down the street is doing it without much trouble, why not us? Running a car on vegetable oil used to mean tinkering with the car and fussing with the oil. But the growth of commercial biodiesel producers and retailers — national biodiesel production quadrupled between 2000 and 2001 alone — is taking the veggie-car movement out of garages and into gas stations. Biodiesel, a chemically refined form of vegetable oil, can be poured straight into any diesel tank and mixed with regular diesel in any proportion. It reduces a car's emissions by 50 to 100 percent, and makes exhaust smell like sizzling oil instead of smoking tires. Add in soaring gas prices, as well as increasing instability in the Middle East, and the result is a movement that has begun to leave word of mouth behind.

BUILDING A BIZ ON BEANS

For nearly three years, a local company named SeQuential Biofuels has sold biodiesel to customers ranging from dedicated environmentalists to commuters to farmers. By April, the company hopes to be producing its own biodiesel instead of trucking it in from the Midwest. By midsummer, it

plans to have its own gas station open for business in Eugene. "And in three years, we'll have a candidate running for president," jokes Ian Hill, a SeQuential co-owner.

The company is small — it has a total of four co-owners, three employees and two interns — but sports a loyal clientele. (The yellow-and-blue "Powered by Biodiesel" stickers on cars around town are SeQuential's chief form of advertising.) Customers have three ways of getting the soybean-derived oil: delivery, pickup or self-service. None is as convenient as going to the corner gas station, which is why SeQuential wants a station of its own. But once the fuel tank is full, the car runs as usual.

Beller and McQueen, who bought their shiny silver Golf a year ago, signed up for SeQuential's delivery service in March. In their side yard, under a waterproof barbecue cover, sits a green, 55-gallon oil drum. SeQuential delivered the drum, full of pure biodiesel or B100, to their house in exchange for a \$30 deposit on the drum and the cost of the biodiesel. Now they simply use a hand pump to fill their fuel tank.

"It's just so much easier to get in the car and not feel like I'm contributing as much to the horrible mess on this planet," says Beller. "The only problem is that I ride my bike less." Beller admits that the one-stop-shopping aspect of signing up for ready-made biodiesel helped convince her to try it. "There's no way I'd make the stuff," she agrees.

SeQuential has a partnership with Eugene-based Tyree Oil to ship its biodiesel and store it in Eugene. Every Saturday morning, Hill or another employee drives over to Tyree's headquarters at First and Blair and loads the back of the SeQuential company truck with an enormous tote full of biodiesel. From 10 am to 2 pm, customers can swing by, fill up their car, and write out a check.

On a cool spring Saturday, Gorman rattles

up in his white Datsun pickup, loaded in the back with his own 55-gallon drum. Hill fills up the drum and helps Gorman secure it with ropes; weighed down in the back, Gorman slowly rumbles away. Katie O'Connor, a member of a local cooperative called Eugene BioCarShare, drives up in a black diesel Golf. The cooperative's car, she says, is actually a 1982 diesel Mercedes named Eva. But she needs to drive more these days than she'd expected, so she bought the Golf for herself. "I named this car Bob," she says proudly, waving a arm over the Golf. "But I'm not sure it'll stick. I'll have to wait and see."

Along with the fill-ups and the drum-delivery service, SeQuential has a cardlock pump at Tyree that dispenses a biodiesel-diesel blend (20 percent biodiesel, 80 percent diesel) 24 hours a day to registered customers. The company has additional retail pumps in Portland and Medford, and supplies such groups as Grease Works!, a Corvallis-based biodiesel co-op. Between Portland and Eugene, says Hill, SeQuential serves about 500 customers.

DOWN THE ROAD

The company's long-term goal is to own a chain of fueling stations offering a variety of biofuels, from biodiesel blends to gasoline-ethanol blends. It's part of a national trend; according to the National Biodiesel Board, the number of retail biofueling stations nationwide doubled from 150 last year to more than 300 this year.

Hill and his co-owners — including Tyson Keever and Tomas Endicott — are negotiating a lease with Lane County on a former gas station site at the corner of McVay Highway and Bloomberg Road, near the intersection of Interstate 5 and East 30th Avenue. Together with the county and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, they've applied for grant funding from the Environmental Protection Agency to help clean up the site. They plan to construct an environmentally friendly station, with above-ground tanks and biosoils (a fil-

tration system that keeps most of the station runoff from heading straight into the sewer). They intend to offer three biodiesel blends (B2, B20 and B100) as well as two gasoline-ethanol blends (E10 and E85).

"Any vehicle on the road today will be able to fuel at our station," says Hill. "Well, actually, that's not true — electric vehicles won't be able to fuel there. But everybody else will." Any gasoline-powered car, Hill explains, can fill up on emissions-reducing E10, or a blend of 10 percent ethanol and 90 percent gasoline. (Minnesota, in fact, has mandated that all gasoline sold in the state be E10.) "And if you got a flex-fuel model — an option on all American-made vehicles since 2000, more or less — you can use E85," says Hill.

Because of production costs (and recent soybean shortages), biodiesel is pricey: SeQuential's B100 generally sells for more than \$3 a gallon. (Given the greater fuel efficiency of diesels, however, that higher price averages out; most diesels get up to about 45 miles per gallon, compared to about half that for most gasoline-powered cars.) Selling their own fuel, says Hill, should be a better deal for customers. And down the road, he adds, prices could drop even further if Oregon farmers start growing crops just for biodiesel, such as rapeseed.

THE PACE OF CHANGE

Many of SeQuential's customers buy only the pure B100, shunning the petroleum blends the company also offers. But not everybody is ready to give up black gold entirely. Most government fleets, for example, use only B5, B20 or E10. They have to comply with governmental regulations mandating cleaner fuels, but they also want to save money, and the straight stuff simply costs more. (SeQuential's B20, at the Tyree pump, costs almost a dollar less per gallon than B100.) The city of Eugene uses B20 in its fleet, while the UO's diesel vehicles use a variety of blends. Lane County Transit has more than 100 diesel buses, none of which use biodiesel.

On Wednesday, March 2, the Oregon Environmental Council will host Biofuels Lobby Day, a statewide conference in Salem for the biofuels community.

"Biodiesel is unique," says Carol Burdick, the manager of SeQuential's Portland office. "People of different backgrounds, conservatives, liberals, can come together and agree that having biofuels produced locally and used locally benefits the economy, the environment, national security — everything." **EW**

CHOICES, CHOICES

There's more than one way to run a car on vegetable oil. Do-it-yourselfers like the SVO (straight vegetable oil) method, in which the car has a tank of vegetable oil and a tank of diesel. The car runs on the oil, but warms up and cools down on the diesel. And frugal souls prefer the WVO (waste vegetable oil) method, in which the car has been modified to use the free leftover fryer oil from restaurants.



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