

Culver's cooking up biofuel with state aid

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A \$15,000 technology feasibility grant from the state energy office will be used by Madison Environmental Group and Culver's restaurants to assess the commercial applications of used vegetable oil as a biofuel.

A first-of-its-kind endeavor for the state, the grant will help the environmental firm and restaurant chain to initiate a pilot program of cars capable of running on used vegetable oil in place of traditional diesel fuel. Culver's franchisees Russ Trzebiatowski and Ben Hoffman already operate vehicles converted to run on used vegetable oil.

Administration Secretary Marc Marotta said the project will provide a real-world testing ground for the biofuel, which has been used almost exclusively by hobbyists.

"You don't have to talk to too many business owners around Wisconsin to know that rising fuel costs are an impediment to the growth of their business," Marotta said. "The solution to this problem requires innovation here at home rather than dependence on natural resources abroad, and this grant is a step in that direction. It is our hope that this project will create interest in all types of alternative fuels, and lead to a larger exploration of the viable alternatives to fossil fuels that we have right here in Wisconsin."

Vegetable oil used as a biofuel produces zero net greenhouse gas emissions, zero sulfur emissions, and less particulate matter ("soot") than diesel or gasoline. It can be turned into fuel after a simple filtering process between the fryer and the fuel tank. Diesel cars and trucks are capable of using vegetable oil after a conversion process involving slight modifications to the diesel engine and the addition of a vegetable oil fuel tank.

"At Culver's we're committed to being a good neighbor, and an environmentally conscious company," said Craig Culver, co-founder of Culver's restaurants. "This project is an exciting opportunity for our franchise owners to turn a waste product into a fuel source, and be environmentally responsible at the same time."

Madison Environmental Group said it plans to develop a user-friendly toolkit of technical and financial information to assist restaurant owners in using vegetable oil to fuel their vehicles. For additional details, go to www.madisonenvironmental.com.