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Summary

Though efforts to promote biodiesel have focused on subsidies and use mandates, the solution is far more simple: remove the unnecessary and costly Environmental Protection Agency regulations on this clean-burning fuel.

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“If farmers can’t profit directly from biodiesel they will never plant enough crops to make a dent in America’s fuel demands and the price of biodiesel will remain too high for widespread adoption.”

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Promoting biodiesel is easy: Set farmers free to sell it

by Angela Eckhardt

I first learned of biodiesel five years ago and was determined to make it myself when I left Portland for rural Northeast Oregon. Since then my husband and I have instructed hundreds of people on how to make their own diesel fuel out of used fryer grease for roughly \$.50 a gallon.

The process, called transesterification, is incredibly simple. It involves adding a methanol-lye or ethanol-lye mixture to the vegetable oil and letting the glycerin (soap) molecules settle out, leaving a clean-burning fuel that can be used in any diesel vehicle or generator, and in heating oil furnaces.

Numerous studies have proven the quality and environmental benefits of this fuel, but getting biodiesel to really take off has been difficult. Ironically, the Environmental Protection Agency poses the biggest obstacle.

In order to sell biodiesel one must register with, and make regular reports to, the EPA and either pay \$2,500 to the National Biodiesel Board or spend millions of dollars to re-prove its environmental health safety. Otherwise one faces \$25,000 daily fines.

The stifling effect of these obstacles can’t be overestimated. If it weren’t for the EPA, our family would have started a biodiesel business long ago, and so would many of the farmers I’ve spoken with. Making your own fuel is a financial solution. The incentives to plant are already there and the entire process can be done on a small-scale.

Farmers know it’s a bum deal to work through a middleman to reach customers. Fuel is sure to bring in a good price, but who can say what processors will pay for oil seed stock? If farmers can’t profit directly from biodiesel they will never plant enough crops to make a dent in America’s fuel demands and the price of biodiesel will remain too high for widespread adoption.

Biodiesel represents an enormous opportunity, not only for its environmental and economic benefits, but for its liberating potential. There is a reason the terms “fuel” and “power” also have political application. Petroleum can’t be obtained by just anyone so it is ripe for control. Biodiesel can literally put power into the hands of every person.

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The biodiesel opportunity has been suppressed for over a century. Rudolf Diesel designed his engine to run on a variety of vegetable oils and thought the technology would be a boon to farmers.

Now that biofuels have finally regained the national spotlight, America is at a crossroads. We can pursue subsidies and use mandates to build on the petroleum fuel model, with large-scale agribusiness supplying a few giant processors. Or we can we remove counterproductive laws for a paradigm shift to an agrarian fuel model, where local farmers grow the industry from the ground up and reap the profits.

Unfortunately, some biofuel advocates who never have driven a diesel vehicle or made a batch of biodiesel paint an overly complicated picture of the fuel. They suggest that if regulations are eliminated, drivers might get bad biodiesel and shun this opportunity altogether. Some biodiesel retailers have obtained the EPA's blessing and appreciate that regulations limit their competition.

Consumers can't afford to turn their noses up at biodiesel given the high costs of petroleum fuel, and there is no reason why they would. Biodiesel is superior to petroleum fuel in every way, and it is easy to see if a processing mistake has been made because the oil will not separate into two distinct layers of biodiesel and glycerin. Any retailers who are so unscrupulous as to knowingly sell a bad batch face legal liability.

Retailers who want any longevity in the industry will comply with established biodiesel fuel standards. Voluntary certification programs like BQ9000 can provide extra assurance, and biofuel advocacy groups can develop to advise retailers and rate them based on the results of simple quality tests.

Biodiesel makes sense on so many levels that it doesn't need to be propped up by the government. It just needs to be set free.

Angela Eckhardt is director of Cascade Policy Institute's Rural Oregon Freedom Project and author of "Freedom Fuel: How and Why Biodiesel Policy Should Reflect Freedom," online at www.cascadepolicy.org. She may be reached at angela@cascadepolicy.org.

Basic Biodiesel Recipe:
1 liter unused vegetable oil
200 milliliters methanol
3.5 grams lye

Dissolve lye completely into methanol. Add methanol-lye solution to vegetable oil and mix for 5 minutes. Let settle. Oil should separate into two distinct layers, with biodiesel on top and a thicker, darker layer of glycerin on the bottom. The biodiesel should measure between .860 and .900 in a hydrometer, usually falling at .880. Detailed **d i r e c t i o n s**, **s a f e t y** precautions, instructions for using fryer grease, and plans for building an inexpensive processor are online at www.biodieselcommunity.org.

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