

Culver's Fries Up Green Fuel For Cars : A \$15,000 Grant Will Help Power Modified Diesel Cars On Used Restaurant Fryer Oil.

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In the kitchen of a Madison Culver's Monday, dark vats of oil bubbled at 352 degrees Fahrenheit, and the smell of french fries hung in the air. It's the smell, it turns out, of fuel.

As drivers gear up for Memorial Day trips, politicians and environmentalists gathered at the Culver's restaurant at 2102 W. Beltline to give a tiny grant toward what might become a bigger trend -- running cars on the oil from restaurant fryers.

"I never dreamed that I'd be making Butter Burgers and fueling cars as well," joked Craig Culver, co-founder of the hamburger and frozen custard chain. "Who knows where it will go?"

The state Department of Administration is giving consulting firm Madison Environmental Group a \$15,000 grant to help Culver's start a pilot program of running converted diesel cars on used, filtered soybean oil.

"This is really a beginning and we hope it will lead to something larger," said department secretary Marc Marotta, noting the role rising fuel costs have played in holding back economic growth.

So far the number of Madison drivers using unaltered restaurant oil to fuel their cars is probably barely a dozen, said Rebecca Grossberg, a program manager for Madison Environmental. Fuel from restaurant oil is different from biodiesel fuel, which is diesel made from sources such as used restaurant oil.

But the reasons for using the grease are intriguing:

- * The more than 280 Culver's restaurants use an average of 3,000 gallons of oil yearly in their fryers.

- * Local franchise owner Susan Bulgrin said she now pays for a rendering plant to pick up the oil -- meaning the cost for drivers could be very low.

- * When burned in cars, the fuel produces no greenhouse gases or sulfur emissions and puts out less soot than gasoline or diesel, Grossberg said.

Cars must also burn some regular diesel fuel in conjunction with the oil, so drivers need to add an extra fuel tank and fuel lines to their cars to use it, Grossberg said.

Local driver Ryan Dewald said that conversion cost him a little more than \$1,000 -- meaning he needs to drive about 26,000 miles to recoup his investment.

Bulrich said she was already considering joining other Culver's franchisees who have converted two cars to run on their own restaurants' oil.

"I think it's very important that we try to recycle what we can because our environment is very fragile," she said.

For more information about the project, go to www.madisonenvironmental.com or call Rebecca Grossberg at 280-0800.

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