

Environmental group works to run cars on Culver's old frying oil
Wisconsin Technology Network
Les Chappell • Published 05/25/05

<http://wistechnology.com/article.php?id=1861>

Madison, Wis. — The next alternative fuel source for Wisconsin may be where consumers least expect it – in the basement of a restaurant.

The Wisconsin Department of Administration announced on Monday a \$15,000 technological feasibility grant will be awarded to the Madison Environmental Group consulting firm to develop cars operating on vegetable oil. Madison Environmental will be working with the restaurant chain Culver's, which has successfully modified two diesel engine cars to use filtered oil from the fryers.

The modified cars have an additional fuel tank and lines to store the oil, and the engine is slightly modified so it heats up the oil and moves it around. Diesel fuel is still necessary to get the car started and turn it off, but after a few minutes drivers can change to oil using a dashboard switch.

"If you're only driving a few miles it's not worth it, but vegetable oil works really well for long trips," said Rebecca Grossberg, program manager for Madison Environmental Group. The cars were originally designed for managers who needed to visit Culver's locations around the state.

Russell Trzebiatowski, manager of Culver's in Stevens Point and Marshfield and owner of a converted Volkswagen Bug, said the fuel change leads to no drop in mileage and acceleration. The cars also have no sulfur or greenhouse gas emissions and have an improved horsepower.

Grossberg said that Madison Environmental Group plans to use the grant money to study the design and develop a toolkit that can let Culver's owners convert vehicles in one weekend. The team will offer consulting sessions and a training video to interested Culver's offices, hopefully getting 12 to 15 restaurants to join the effort.

"We're trying to serve as an intermediary and technical support ... [and] bring the franchise owners higher up on the learning curve." Grossberg said. "This project is about sharing information."

According to Scott Larrivee, a spokesperson for the DOA, the grant is one of many initiatives spearheaded by the state to research alternative fuel sources. Fuel and energy costs are two of the main concerns to Wisconsin residents, and since there is limited support at the federal level Governor Jim Doyle wants to focus on in-state resources.

Larrivee said Wisconsin has made several advances – the state's fleet of vehicles uses ethanol-based gasoline and Doyle added funding for biofuels in his budget – but the DOA

wants to test every possible source of fuel. "There are a lot of things we can do to explore options we already have in the state," Larrivee said.

Larrivee added that in addition to the environmental benefits of using vegetable oil as fuel, it is also a successful recycling project. Culver's typically pays to have the grease taken away to rendering plants, so using it as fuel would save money in more than one way.

If Madison Environmental Group can successfully work with the design, Grossberg said it could be possible in the future to expand outside Culver's and into the community. Each Culver's produces around 20 gallons of oil a day – enough fuel for three to five modified cars – and the outlets using the cars have been able to install pumps that dispense oil like a gas station.

Larrivee said that while it is still soon to tell how successful the vehicles will be, the state is more interested what the experimentation turns up. Even if the cars prove to be an impractical fuel solution, working with vegetable oil may provide a better insight on how to create natural fuels.

"I don't think anyone knows what the next alternative fuel will be," Larrivee said. "We hope that this creates interest at the public level and leads to an examination of resources here in Wisconsin."

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