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BUSINESS

Saturday, January 12, 2008

"Why Biodiesel?"

By Laura Keeter | Daily Times Staff Writer

Triangle Biofuels Industries Inc. of Wilson will start production in about a month, but the business is already gathering up grease from restaurants in Wilson and Raleigh and other cities in the state.

On Wednesday, Greg Potts, vice president for operations, cranked up his Dodge van that's decked out with the Biodiesel logos.

"Ask your heating professional about bioheat," the van advises.

"We collect restaurant cooking oil," another sign reads.

And yet another sign asks, "Why Biodiesel?" It then lists the advantages as follows: biodiesel is renewable, burns up to 80 percent cleaner, is biodegradable and non-toxic. It's also made in the United States.

The van is not only an advertiser of the product, it's also a customer. The van has a five-cylinder Mercedes-Benz engine that uses 100 percent biodiesel fuel and gets about 27 miles to the gallon.

A "green-collar" entrepreneur in the emerging biofuels business, Potts and his partner are doing most of the leg work themselves for the new company.

Beside the Dumpster behind JAC's Grill, Potts parked the van and then pulled on his blue jump suit. He used a collection wand from the back of the van to suck the used cooking oil out of a 55-gallon collection drum.

"We're excited about using as much recaptured products as we can," he said.

So far, Triangle Biofuels has signed up about 31 restaurants, hotels, and cafeterias such as Barton College. The company has also begun advertising in places other than the van.

Company officials plan to approach major corporations, such as Kentucky Fried Chicken, which has announced it would stop using lard and begin to use a non-transfatty oil such as soybean oil.

Potts is visiting restaurant owners to talk about their commercial collection, which is done at no cost to the restaurant. Most restaurants pay rendering companies to come pick up and dispose of their grease. Small restaurants may produce 30 gallons a month of oil and large restaurants often produce around 500 gallons a month.

Triangle Biofuels now has two collection vans. Each van will be able to handle about 70 small restaurant accounts.

"I think we'll have 10 of these vans in the next 12 months," Potts said.

Because the price of soybeans has jumped up almost 100 percent in the last 12 months, being able to blend the soybean oil with recovered vegetable oils will make the finished product more economical for customers, Potts said. If possible, the plant would like to use 100 percent reclaimed vegetable oil.

By summer, the plant will also have technology in place also to use rendered animal fats from poultry and hog slaughterhouses.

THE PLANT

Triangle Biofuels will open as the largest biofuels plant in the state, Potts said.

The 4,500 square-foot production facility is at 1724 Balfree Road between Brown Oil-Wilson Petroleum Co. and a CSX railroad spur.

The plant is also opening with room for rapid growth. To start, it will occupy only about a fifth of the production space. There is also room on



Keith Barnes | Daily Times

Greg Potts cleans off a collection wand after collecting used cooking oil from J...

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the grounds for future expansion of the plant.

On the grounds, there's also 14 large, former oil tanks on site that the company has recycled from area companies. The tanks will be cleaned, painted, and used for 260,000 gallons of storage on site.

Working to open the plant have been Potts and Zach Hamm, president of the company and a Wake County resident.

The two, as well as their predominant investors, are graduates of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Sigma Chi fraternity brothers.

Originally, the partners targeted Durham and Wake counties for its location but ran into barriers, Potts said.

Jennifer Lantz, executive director of the Wilson Economic Development Council, helped the company to come into Wilson County, Potts said.

The Wilson site turned out to be ideal, the partners say. The 5-acre site is right beside the railroad track, and once the plant gets major contracts it will need rail that can ship out biodiesel in bulk via 24,000-gallon rail cars versus trucking it at 6,000 gallons a load in tankers -- that's one rail car versus four trucks.

In the next three years, Triangle Biofuels should be at its maximum capacity, which is producing about 10 million gallons of biodiesel a year, Hamm said.

The plant will employ five to six employees initially, and it's expected to grow to 30 to 50 employees in the next three years. Eventually, the plant will run on two to three shifts.

"We're poised really for rapid expansion," Potts said.

The first goal is to produce 1 million to 3 million gallons of biodiesel in the first 12-18 months of operation, Hamm said.

Triangle Biofuels Industries Inc. will manufacture, distribute and sell biodiesel products to government, industrial, commercial and residential customers.

Triangle Biofuels uses biodiesel at the plant to run its boilers and heat and generators.

The Baldree Road site will also serve as a retail sales outlet with a gas station-style pump selling B-100 biodiesel behind the building.

Brown Oil-Wilson Petroleum Co. will be the major distributor in Wilson of blended products.

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