

Strategic View: My Vegginator's a BABE

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Over spring break I took a trip to the French Quarter to participate in a BABE rally. No, it's not what you think! BABE stands for Big Apple to Big Easy, and is in the class of "banger" car rallies first popularized in Europe. A banger is any car bought for \$250 or less. My teammates picked up a 1983 Mercedes diesel sedan, converted it to run on recycled vegetable oil ("yellow grease"), and we entered BABE with about 50 other bangers.¹

Yellow grease runs very nicely through a diesel engine, as long as the oil is initially filtered, dewatered, and preheated. Although the oil creates greenhouse gases when burned, it is part of a closed renewable system – first taking CO₂ from the atmosphere when the vegetables are grown, and then releasing it back when the oil is consumed. Thus the net impact on the environment is much less than from burning fossil fuels. Veggie oil also burns much cleaner than diesel.

The Green Grease Monkeys converted our car to run on recycled veggie oil. The Monkeys installed an auxiliary tank in the trunk for the yellow grease. Their system first warms up the oil, and then we flip a few solenoid switches on the dashboard to shift circulation from diesel to the veggie tank.

While our car (The Vegginator) runs on recycled vegetable oil, through a chemical process the oil can be separated into biodiesel and glycerin (which is used in soaps). The biodiesel can be pumped directly into a diesel fuel tank, without pre-warming. If we recycled two-thirds of the country's yellow grease into biodiesel every year, it would translate into over 200 million gallons of fuel.² Demand for yellow grease is on the rise, and restaurants that were paying to get rid of their oil are now finding a ready market. A plant scheduled to open next year will produce three million gallons of biodiesel using grease collected from 400 Manhattan restaurants at no cost.³

The veggie conversion system worked beautifully through the Smokies and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The other bangers were a sight to behold, including a UK entry with half the top sheared off and a massive Union Jack flying from a curtain-rod flagpole. This colorful team performed a "flag break" ceremony every morning in the parking lot, complete with salutes, music ("Rule Britannia") and a formal flag raising.

Team Greasers made it from Boston to New Orleans on 75 gallons of recycled veggie oil and only a half tank of diesel. Once there we met up with an enterprising fellow who is powering his house and all of

1 Thank you teammates Kent Christman and Richard Freierman for an excellent adventure.

2 *Choices*, Q1 2006.

3 *The New York Times*, May 28, 2007.

his vehicles on yellow grease. He generously gave us 60 gallons for the way home and we headed down to the French Quarter to celebrate with When Pigs Fly, Trust in Rust and the other BABE teams.

Bringing biodiesel to scale raises a host of issues, not the least of which are pressure on the food supply and the risk of deforestation. Recycled veggie oil is an easy first step. If we all keep working at it, I expect in a few years to look back on the Vegginator as a quaint story on our path to a greener energy future.