

## ON POLITICS

By ANTHONY STASI

## Setting the Record Straight When It Comes to Biofuels

In the May issue of Money magazine, on page 83, there is information as to why things (the economy, the energy crisis, the stock market, etc.) are not as bad as they were in 1972. As energy is concerned, the writers explain that although the price of oil is soaring, Americans are twice as efficient as they were 35 years ago.

What is the plan to be twice as energy efficient for the next 30 years? It is no longer simply an environmental theory that we have passed our peak in regard to crude oil availability. Now we need to seek out and develop alternative fuels.

Unfortunately, even with gas prices hitting close to \$4 per gallon, there is a slow and cautious reaction to alternative fuels. Much of this is due to the misinformation in the media about biofuels. Biofuel can be derived from corn, soybeans, palm oil, and used cooking oil and trap grease.

In recent articles in Time magazine and The New York Times, the focus is primarily on corn ethanol. We will hear a lot about corn ethanol in the next few months as the election winds down, but what about the fuel sources other than corn?

I went to Tri State Biodiesel, a new company with headquarters in Manhattan, to meet with Brent Baker. Baker started this company a few years ago, after learning that a bunch of women, calling themselves "The Veggie Babes," traveled across the country in a van

powered by used cooking oil. Baker was already an accomplished environmentalist, and this new approach caught his attention.

Today, Tri State Biodiesel will pick up used cooking oil from New York restaurants for free. The oil then gets filtered into biodiesel fuel, which can be used in almost any diesel engine. This is big news for New Yorkers, since most of the greenhouse gases that are emitted in our city come from the boilers in our buildings (not from our automobiles).

According to National Renewable Energy Laboratories, a research wing of the Department of Energy, there are 2 to 4 billion gallons of used cooking oil, and 6 to 8 billion gallons of trap grease that can be used for biodiesel fuel each year in the United States. To put that into perspective, we use 60 billion gallons of diesel fuel each year. A tractor-trailer gets about 5 miles to the gallon with regular diesel fuel. With biodiesel, the same tractor-trailer can get 10 to 15 miles per gallon. That almost cuts our usage of diesel fuel in half before having to grow one additional plant in order to produce energy. Imagine bringing our diesel consumption down from 60 billion gallons to less than 30 billion gallons. And it burns cleaner.

A recent bill introduced by Councilman James Gennaro of Queens calls for New York City's buildings to start at a 5 percent biodiesel blend, and eventually reach a 20 percent blend in their

heating oil. This means that the diesel and biodiesel oil will blend together. Baker tells me that the 20 percent blend is as far as a boiler can go without needing to be enhanced or replaced. That will reduce a great deal of diesel oil consumption, especially when our buildings are causing 79 percent of the city's carbon dioxide emissions.

Critics of this kind of innovation point to the costs. Biodiesel is not cheap to produce. The federal government passed the Blender's Credit in 2004, which gives oil companies a tax credit for blending fuels and passing the savings to the consumer.

The American Lung Association says that biodiesel is 90 percent less toxic than regular diesel fuel. New York City's government is not the only government making important changes. Minnesota, in May, passed legislation to bring their buildings' biodiesel usage to 20 percent as well.

People have challenged the use of biofuels, and they are right to question it. We do not want to take influence from the oil companies and hand right over to the agri-



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business companies. Corn ethanol only gives 1.2 BTUs of energy for every 1 BTU that it takes to produce it (and you lose the corn as a food source). But soybeans yield a 3.5 to 1 ratio of energy gained from energy used to produce it — and the bean can still be used as a food source. Biodiesel — cooking oil — gives us a 5,5 to 1 ratio.

"Biodiesel is not the magic cure to our energy use. We need to improve and use mass transit. Habits have to change, and the rest can be addressed with alternative fuels," explains Baker.

While biodiesel is no miracle cure, it is important to remember that it costs taxpayers to remove used cooking oil and trap grease anyway. At least if it is used as a fuel source, the collection of it has two uses instead of one.

If we can cut down on our consumption of oil, and use oil from cooking, soybeans, and other sources, such as algae, we will be making our country safer and less dependent on the Middle East and other rogue states. Isn't that worth a government tax credit or subsidy in itself? And since many underserved and lower income families live in buildings and crowded areas, heating buildings with cleaner fuel will make their air cleaner.

Right now, the media is confusing all biofuel efforts with the influence of big agriculture. People do not want to trade Exxon's influence for Archer Daniels Midland's influence, but not all biofuels are the same. Cooking oil and the soybean alone can put us much farther ahead in our move away from foreign oil.

## Quick Correction

Last week I wrote about biodiesel technology. After my article went to print, I realized a few things that I wished to make clear. Biodiesel fuel is processed, and not filtered. Tractor-trailer trucks, if they are made to get 10 to 15 miles per gallon, and then have their fuel blended with biodiesel, can save up to 30 billion gallons of fuel each year. I also mentioned that the state of Minnesota mandated that buildings use biodiesel fuel, when it actually mandated that all diesel fuel be blended with a 2 percent biodiesel blend. This actually makes the point of the article stronger, but in the spirit of full disclosure, I wanted to get this straight, since the issue of alternative fuel is extremely important to me.