

## Pacifica OKs next step for fuel facility

Locals against biodiesel plant say chemicals will invite lawsuits

[By Julia Scott, STAFF WRITER](#)

Article Last Updated: 01/16/2008 02:36:38 AM PST

PACIFICA — Recycled restaurant oil may become Pacifica's new claim to fame under a plan to build a biodiesel production plant that could someday power most of the Bay Area's converted cars.

On Monday, the Pacifica City Council voted 4-1 to approve an addition to the environmental impact report for a new biodiesel production facility to be added to the grounds of the city's wastewater treatment plant, taking it one step closer to final approval.

If the final design passes muster with the city, the California Coastal Commission and other agencies, by early 2009 the plant will begin producing

3 million gallons per year of locally refined recycled biodiesel for public use that is expected to jump-start Pacifica's economy as well as cut down on greenhouse gas emissions in each car that uses it.

The plant, to be built and run by Whole Energy Fuels, would become one of the Bay Area's largest biodiesel production plants. It also aims to reach out to oil distributors, such as Olympian, who might be interested in adding a biodiesel pump at their filling stations. It would also generate a small portion of the Calera Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant's own electricity needs.

Where many locals see promise, others see the plant as a potential liability because of the combustible cocktail of chemicals used in the refining process. Both sides made passionate arguments on Monday, including representatives of the owner of an adjacent rock quarry, concerned about the effect the plant could have on property values.

Timothy Tosta, a lawyer for quarry developer Don Peebles, said he would meet with Whole Energy Fuels next week to discuss his concerns.

"It could be that all of these things are either fixable or misunderstood. But the record suggests the need for further information," said Tosta.

Pacifica resident Cynthia Montanez was more blunt.

"Let's face it — people are human and accidents can and will happen. How will we notify students and parents if a spill occurs? What happens in case of a fire?" asked Montanez, president of Pacificans for Progress, a local interest group.

Martin Wahl, director of business development in California for Whole Energy Fuels, acknowledged the chemicals used as catalysts to accomplish the process that produces biodiesel from vegetable oil are dangerous. Chief among these is methanol.

"If you inhale or drink it, it can cause blindness and nerve damage. That's why it needs to be double-contained and metered into your processes very carefully," said Wahl. "You will hear stories about plants where there were explosions, where methanol was not handled properly."

To ensure safety, the chemicals will be handled through special hoses and contained in double-walled tanks. The computer-controlled process will be monitored by a staff member, and any leakage will trigger an alarm. Any obnoxious French-fry-like odors the plant might emit will be contained in the tanks as well, according to Wahl.

Whole Energy Fuels already maintains at least one biodiesel production plant and retails to 25 fueling stations across Washington State. Another one, based in Richmond, sells B99 fuel to truckers near the Chevron oil refinery. B99 indicates the product is mostly biodiesel instead of diesel blend, like the more common B20.

Pacifica's plant will produce B99, and Wahl thinks the climbing cost of regular diesel as well as state pressure to reduce emissions will persuade growing numbers of motorists to switch to biodiesel in the coming years.

"There will be an overwhelming demand for biodiesel. We're certain of that in the Bay Area," said Wahl.

And there is plenty of supply. Wahl estimates that the Bay Area produces 11 million gallons of used cooking oil per year, and Peninsula restaurants alone could provide much of the grease the biodiesel plant will require on a weekly basis.

Pacifica's first official biodiesel plant will add to a small underground community of co-operatives founded by environmentally-minded county residents. Pacifica's biodiesel co-op was one of the first established, but it now uses a filling station in Half Moon Bay.

The MB Garage in San Mateo serves a growing community of biodiesel-powered vehicles throughout the county. A straight veggie-oil-only co-op (for cars converted to run on pure recycled restaurant grease) also exists in Half Moon Bay.

In spite of a seeming limitless amount of source material, the rest of the biodiesel landscape shares a dearth of public access stations. San Francisco's Biodiesel Access Task Force was established to increase the use of biodiesel fuel by the city and the general public.

Local companies have established fueling stations in San Anselmo and Berkeley, but their capacity and geographical outreach are limited.

"Being a biodiesel user myself, one of the biggest challenges is a steady supply of high-quality recycled biodiesel. There's a very big demand for this, and very few people have stepped up to fill that role," said Nancy Hall, a Pacifica resident who came up with the idea to bring a biodiesel production plant to Pacifica and locate it next to the wastewater treatment plant.

Hall sat down with a chemist, an engineer and a business planner to look at how to execute the design. They realized that in addition to producing electricity for the wastewater plant, the biodiesel facility could use reclaimed water from the plant in its production process. The biodiesel plant will eliminate all its emissions, such as carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, by passing them through the wastewater plant's own system.

Staff writer Julia Scott can be reached at 650-348-4340 or at Julia.

[scott@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:scott@bayareanewsgroup.com).