

Biodiesel in West Marin: How about a pump?

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Before November 2006, the nearest biodiesel pump for West Marin residents was in Berkeley. A pump opened late last year in San Anselmo, and there are plans for a pump at Toby's Feed Barn in Point Reyes Station, but some locals desiring a convenient source now have taken the problem of supply into their own hands.

Last month, Dave Evans of Marin Sun Farms invited consultants to his retail shop at the corner of Highway One and Sir Francis Drake Boulevard to explore the possibility of installing a pump there, but concerns about the flood zone near the bridge cut short the discussion.

Marin Organic Executive Director Helge Hellberg and Toby's owner Chris Giacomini have been planning for over a year to install a pump in the storage lot on the barn's south side, but with no set date for installation some residents have started cooperatives to meet their needs.

The co-op

Early Tuesday morning, Inverness resident Kris Brown pulled her Volkswagen Jetta inside a pale blue, single-car garage along Highway One in Point Reyes Station, her tailpipe puttering a popcorn scent. Brown does not live in the house there, but she keeps fuel in the garage, which now serves as the headquarters of the Point Reyes Station biodiesel co-op.

Inside, biodiesel is distributed from eight 55-gallon blue plastic barrels, which stand upright along the walls – patient servants to Brown and other West Marin residents in search of a more sustainable fuel source, better gas mileage and a clearer conscience.

“It's not just about not wanting to visit the pump,” said Susan Prince, who leaves her garage open at all hours for co-op members to fill up. “It's about not wanting to support the consumption of oil and not wanting to contribute to the pollution problem. A co-op is another way of practicing sustainability.” Prince drives a 2003 Black VW Jetta TDI that gets at least 33 miles to the gallon on biodiesel. She said she can make four trips over the hill and back without having to fill up.

Besides Brown and Prince, there are two other co-op members, both of whom get at least 40 miles to the gallon, who draw periodically from the eight barrels.

“I've never had to wait in line,” said Brown, who breathed heavy as she turned a fire-engine-red hand crank to draw the olive green liquid through a clear plastic tube into her car's 12-gallon tank. It takes her 220 revolutions to fill up.

The San Francisco-based People's Fuel Cooperative visits the garage every two or three months to refill the tanks, and members keep separate barrels to accommodate their varying needs. Those that share barrels keep a tally of their takings, calculating the amount pumped and the price of the fuel at the time on a clipboard: on Monday, MALT Education Director Constance Washburn drew 12.96 gallons at \$3.40 per gallon, for a total of \$44.06.

Irregular delivery, manual cranking and tedious tally making are minor inconveniences to the “primitive” but otherwise smoothly running co-op, according to Inverness resident Skoby Zook. “Despite our best efforts, we sometimes dribble a little on the floor,” Zook said. Before he and Brown (his spouse) became members, Zook made periodic trips to BioFuel Oasis in Berkeley, where he filled 5-gallon tanks and transported them back to town.

No immediate plans

Recent efforts to bring a biodiesel pump to West Marin have flagged. Mark Reano, owner of Greendbridge Gas in Point Reyes Station, considered installing one last year, but decided against it when faced with space limitations and the difficulty of obtaining proper permitting. The prospect of competition does not worry Reano, who said his diesel

customers, most of whom are contractors, account for little of his base. For those who do drive diesel automobiles, biodiesel, costing as much as 50 cents more per gallon than regular petro-diesel, is not always a viable option.

Reano said he welcomes the advent of biodiesel in West Marin, despite the possibility of losing a fraction of his customers. "Bringing biodiesel here is a great idea," he said.

Though other sites have been considered for the West Marin pump, Toby's Feed Barn, with its convenient location in downtown Point Reyes Station, is the most likely candidate. The pump fits with other sustainability-minded initiatives at Toby's, such as the farmers market and the community garden, said Giacomini, who is now installing solar panels on the roof to power the coffee bar.

"A biodiesel pump would make the package more complete," he said, adding that he has been approached by LC Biofuels, a Richmond-based producer that recently installed a pump in San Anselmo.

Hellberg said there are plans to install a pump, but would not comment on when it would be installed, who would be responsible for installation, or where it would be located.

Higher cost, greater benefits

Biodiesel sells at a higher cost, at upwards of \$3.60 per gallon, than standard petro-diesel, which now sells for about \$3.19 per gallon. But many residents say the long-term benefits make the higher cost worthwhile.

Biodiesel, essentially a refined vegetable oil, is produced from renewable, domestically-produced sources with high energy content crops (soybeans, rapeseed), or from cooking oil recycled from restaurants. Though most biodiesel on the market is not "pure" – there is a tax incentive for producers to mix in trace amounts of petro-diesel – LC Biofuels and other Bay area suppliers offer the fuel at a B99 rating, indicating a near-pure product.

Biodiesel is non-toxic and biodegradable, and it burns 78 percent cleaner than regular diesel. The carbon footprint, after accounting for the amount removed by plants harvested for the fuel during photosynthesis, is negligible, if not zero, said LC Biofuels co-owner Lance McCardle.

Any diesel engine can accept biodiesel without conversion, McCardle said. In December, the company installed a pump at the Green Fusion Design Center in San Anselmo. Those who wish to draw fuel there must sign up for a user a group, after which they are sent special ATM-type cards to access the pump. Currently, there are about 130 members, and the pump, which is unattended, sees about 10 customers a day.

"We have a lot of customers that come all the way from West Marin to San Anselmo to fill up," McCardle said. The time it would take to install a pump in West Marin, from obtaining the proper permitting to filling the tank for the first customer, would be about six months, he said.