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Schools brew biodiesel success story

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'They've really started something here' Two years ago, workers at Gaston County Schools tried brewing biodiesel in old pots from the school cafeteria. After trying, erring and fine-tuning, they ended up making 10,000 gallons of the stuff.

Grady Truett, the schools' assistant transportation director, thought they could make more. From a mish-mash of surplus military supplies and other used equipment -- some bought on eBay -- he custom-built a production facility in the bay formerly used to paint school buses.

With used grease suctioned from the Lance Cracker factory, school cafeterias and the Shrimp Boat, Truett expects to brew 100,000 gallons of biodiesel this school year. Gaston is the first school district in the state to make its own fuel, and officials say that will save at least \$125,000 in fuel costs.

Biodiesel is a renewable fuel made from fat and oil. It burns clean. With some research, you can make it at home.

Or at school.

"Grady came to us and said, 'I can make diesel,'" said Transportation Director Baxter Starr. Starr smiled in disbelief, but he listened. And he supported the idea.

Starr and schools' Superintendent Reeves McGlohon are proud of the program -- especially because their biodiesel is easier on the lungs of the children who ride Gaston buses, they say.

That was Truett's original inspiration.

"People might not know this, but school-bus emissions are worse inside the bus than outside," Truett said. "That small particulate soot goes deep in your lungs. It doesn't stop at your nose."

Gaston uses a mix of biodiesel and regular diesel. Running the buses with straight biodiesel requires a lot of filter-changing, and the straight biodiesel thickens at cold temperatures.

The department has taken on the fuel-making without adding extra employees, Starr said. Next year, Starr may ask the administration for another person to run a second production shift.

The schools' workers also built the facility, except for the electrical system. It cost about \$100,000. The same facility built from new parts would have cost more than \$1 million, Starr said.

Truett designed the operation with information he found on the Internet.

Now Gaston's biodiesel-making workshop gets frequent visitors: engineers, government employees and others looking to start similar programs.

"He's got this 'aw-shucks' attitude, but when you see everything he's put together and how it works and the benefit it has for the county, they ought to be very proud of him," said Daniel Miles, CEO of Roanoke Valley Resource Authority, a solid-waste management agency in Virginia. Miles visited Gaston County Schools last month to see how its operation worked.

"He thought of something, he tried it, and most importantly, it works," Miles said.

Truett said he got the idea from a speaker who came from Centralina Council of Governments to talk about renewable fuels. A few months later, he called Sarah Niess at the COG and said Gaston County wanted to make biodiesel for its buses.

"I didn't know what to make of it, it seemed like such a far-off goal," Niess said. "Now they have a state-of-the-art facility to show off around the region. They've really started something here."