

Turning Cooking Oil Into Fuel for the County



GREASE IS THE WORD Francisco Diaz, a chef at Sam's of Gedney Way in White Plains, empties fryer grease into a county barrel.

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VATS of grease may make health advocates cringe, but Westchester County officials see excess cooking oil from the county's 3,500 restaurants as a means of cleaner, cheaper fuel.

With seven vehicles that run solely on fuel made from cooking oil and 125 vehicles that run on a mix of cooking oil and diesel fuel, the county has begun a program to take excess oil off local restaurateurs' hands free to use it as an alternative energy source.

At a news conference on Tuesday to announce the program, [Andrew J. Spano](#), the county executive, hailed the program as part of the county's continuing effort to cut costs while reducing emissions that harm the environment.

For every 10,000 gallons of cooking oil collected, the county could save about \$25,000 in diesel fuel costs, Mr. Spano said. It could also provide savings to restaurant owners, many of whom rely on private disposal services to haul away frying oil that cannot be reused, he said.

"This is a product that restaurants would normally have to pay to take away," Mr. Spano

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said.

More important, the program will aid the county in its continued push to reduce its impact on the environment, officials said.

Joseph D. Simoncini, who oversees the county's fleet of 3,800 vehicles, as well as its equipment that runs on gasoline or diesel, said the yearlong experiment of mixing vegetable oil with diesel to fuel vehicles had been so successful that there is room to expand the effort to another 350 vehicles.

It cost \$4,500 to retrofit each of the seven vehicles that run solely on vegetable oil — two educational and training vehicles, including the Veggie Van; three trucks; and two tractors — Mr. Simoncini said. However, running vehicles on a mix of vegetable oil and diesel costs very little, he said.

It is also relatively inexpensive to build processing systems for the oil, several of which are already in place at a cost of about \$1,000 each, Mr. Simoncini said. Should the need arise for more processing systems, the county could build more.

The county has been collecting its vegetable oil from a range of facilities, including county-owned concessionaires and homeless shelters.

According to restaurant owners, however, there could be a bounty of oil out there should restaurants opt to participate.

Koshy Chacko, president of the Westchester chapter of the New York State Restaurant Association, said not having to pay an oil disposal company would be a welcome reprieve for local businesses. It can cost up to \$22 to remove five gallons of oil, and since the ban of [trans fats](#), restaurants have been using healthier oils and must change the oil in their fryers more often.

Mr. Chacko said his Fair Deal Cafe in White Plains produces about 200 gallons of oil every three weeks, which costs \$86 in hauling fees. Food service at the MasterCard headquarters in Purchase, one of the 10 businesses already participating in the county program, disposes of about 100 gallons a month.

With the program newly begun, county officials said it was unclear how many businesses ultimately would participate and how much oil could be collected.

In the meantime, however, the benefits of running vehicles on fuel that costs less and is cleaner is invaluable for both taxpayers and the environment, officials said.

“Besides the cost and the savings, it's the emissions factor,” Mr. Simoncini said. “It's priceless.”

