



THE AUSTRALIAN

Biodiesel lets nation drive on the sheep's back

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12aug06

HORSEPOWER is passe. In the era of environmentally friendly driving, motorists are turning to sheep, cattle and even chooks.

Farmyard animals are not being yoked together to pull cars but the fat in their bodies is being converted into biodiesel to drive fleets of the future.

The fat, or tallow, from one poor deceased sheep will produce about eight litres of biodiesel.

That's about 6 1/2 sheep to fill the tank of Holden's Astra diesel hatchback, meaning you'll get about 105km out of one animal on Holden's published fuel economy figures.

Pigs are better for travelling longer distances, with one unfortunate beast giving Astra drivers about 140km. One cow will keep the engine running for almost 450km.

Chooks, however, will barely get you to the corner, with one chicken worth just 600m.

Andy Fischer's dream is that the nation can once again ride on the sheep's back.

When he first set up Australian Farmers' Fuels, he said, "we would take a carton of beer to a shearing shed, and see four or five farmers who had some interest in biofuels".

"Today we are getting full houses, and turning people away."

The company was formed in 1998 to supply cheaper fuel to farmers and independent country service stations.

When Mr Fischer learnt that German farmers could go to small processing plants and turn their rapeseed (a relative of canola) into fuel for their own use, he saw an opportunity for Australian farmers. "We always believed that farmers potentially could be oil barons."

Some research and development work, with a new graduate hand-processing batches of canola to produce 200-litre drums of biodiesel, resulted in their first venture into selling biodiesel.

It lasted 19 days. The pump was shut down because it was not approved for biodiesel.

"It was only approved for pumping diesel or petrol. To get that approval took us 13 months of bureaucracy," Mr Fischer said.

There was also a marketing difficulty. Farmers loved the idea, but they worried about whether it would damage their machinery.

Rudolph Diesel's first machine ran on peanut oil, and Mr Fischer said biodiesel could replace diesel without conversion costs. The only caution is that normal diesel leaves a sulphur deposit. It is dissolved by biodiesel and can clog filters.

Mr Fischer recommends a blend for about six fuel tanks before going to pure biodiesel.

The company's big break came in 2004, when the Royal Adelaide Show declared itself the first green show in Australia.

"They ran all their ground equipment on our biodiesel blend," he said.

In March last year, the South Australian Government took up a biodiesel blend for its buses and trains. "That was the start of the groundswell," Mr Fischer said.

Biodiesel, which he said was carbon-neutral, is now made from a number of sources, including plant matter and tallow extracted from animals killed in abattoirs.

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