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Biodiesel's power is growing

Alternative fuels become more mainstream as the Valley becomes a home for ethanol.

By Bethany Clough / The Fresno Bee

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Ernie Rogers drives from Utah to Fresno on less than a tank of gas.

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The retired physicist, inventor and fuel-efficiency advocate drives a modified diesel Volkswagen beetle that gets 65 miles per gallon in the summertime.

He also designed an engine that gets more than 100 mpg.

Alternative fuels and innovators like Rogers are becoming more mainstream, especially as the central San Joaquin Valley becomes a home for ethanol producers and President Bush calls for more spending on research on ethanol and increased production of renewable fuels to rid the country of its "addiction" to oil.

But biodiesel doesn't have much of a chance in the Valley and producing it here may face an uphill battle, experts say.

But Rogers, 69, isn't deterred. He hopes to persuade a Utah company to open a plant here, and others in the agriculture industry are quietly experimenting with the fuel's potential.

"We have to use less energy," Rogers said. "Just by improving efficiency and thoughtfulness, we can get by on half the energy in California.

Rogers, a Fresno native who splits time between here and Utah, has modified his VW to get super mileage, upgrading the standard diesel bug with a giant spoiler, special tires and adds some biodiesel fuel to improve efficiency.

Others hope the fuel gains traction. Singer Willie Nelson is opening biodiesel stations nationwide, including two in the San Diego area. Nelson, who powers his tour buses on biodiesel, started the company Willie Nelson's Biodiesel. His Web site says the idea is to do something useful to eliminate America's dependence on foreign oil, help put the the American family farmer back to work and clean up the environment.

Bush in a speech to governors last week said his administration's Advanced Energy Initiative would promote investment in alternative fuels like biodiesel. Bush said, "By applying the talent and innovative spirit of our citizens, we will move beyond a petroleum-based economy, protect our environment, and make America less dependent on foreign sources of energy."

Actors are also getting into the trend. Ford Motor Co. reported that supporting-actor Oscar nominee Jake Gyllenhaal is scheduled to show up at the awards ceremony in a Ford Excursion powered by biodiesel, according to the The Associated Press.

Rogers is a 1958 Fresno State graduate and attended Roosevelt High School. A lifelong inventor, he has patents for power-generating windmills and other ecologically friendly inventions. He worked in the aerospace industry, including a

stint at Morton Thiokol, where he worked on engines that power space shuttle rocket boosters.

He makes the 800-mile trip from Utah to Fresno on 12.5 gallons, never stopping to fuel up.

"I stop at stations and I say, 'Sorry, I don't need any fuel,' " he said.

But solving the nation's reliance on oil isn't as simple as buying a car like Rogers'.

New diesel cars can't be sold in California because they don't meet emissions standards. Rogers bought his in Utah.

Diesel emissions standards for cars are different than those for trucks, and no diesel cars have been certified to be sold in the state since the 2003 model year, said Gennet Paauwe, spokeswoman for the California Air Resources Board.

However, changing engine technology and modifications to diesel fuel mean diesel cars are expected to be sold in the next few years, she said.

There are no biodiesel pumps in the Central Valley, and just 25 retailers in the state sell the fuel.

Rogers is helping a Utah biodiesel company, Domestic Energy Partners, look for a place to build a plant in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Although crops can be grown to produce biodiesel, the ideal varieties, like soybeans, don't thrive in the Valley and might not be profitable if they did, said Dan Sperling, director of the Institute of Transportation Studies at the University of California at Davis.

Fresno State's International Center for Water Technology is experimenting with canola crops on farmland sitting empty because the soil is saturated with selenium, a naturally occurring chemical element linked to deformities in waterfowl.

The canola draws selenium out of the soil and is processed and fed to cattle that need the mineral in their diet.

Canola oil is a byproduct of the process and though it's not profitable to produce it for biodiesel on its own, it could be used to make the fuel, said Jim Tischer, the center's regional program manager.

"If it's part of a larger process then it may have real value to the Central Valley," Tischer said.

A study released last year also suggested gas from dairy manure, known as biomethane, could be used to power motor vehicles and generate electricity.

But ethanol is having a better time here.

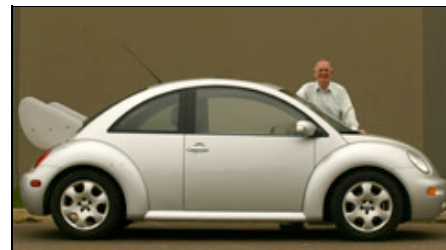
An ethanol plant is up and running in Goshen and Fresno-based Pacific Ethanol plans operations in Madera and Visalia. Calgren Renewable Fuels LLC has plans for plants in Hanford and Pixley.

Rogers' plans for the future include building his engine that gets 100 mpg. Right now the design is only on paper.

And he'll continue to drive his silver Volkswagen with the attention-getting wing on the back.

"Girls think it looks cool," he said. "Guys think it looks funny."

The reporter can be reached at bclough@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6431.



Ernie Rogers has a car that can run on biodiesel fuel or diesel. The 2003 Volkswagen beetle with a diesel engine gets 65 mpg in the summertime.

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