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Bye bye diesel, hello soybeans

By **Josh B. Wardrop**/ Staff Writer
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Trucks and tractors running on soybeans may sound like some farfetched scenario from an Isaac Asimov novel, but Harvard University is making this sci-fi concept an everyday reality in Allston, Brighton and Cambridge.

Early this year, Harvard made the decision to move away from using diesel fuel in its university service vehicles in favor of biodiesel, an environmentally friendly fuel made from renewable resources, including soybean oil.

Today, all 42 of the university's formerly diesel-powered machines have been converted to biodiesel.

"Beginning in 2002, we worked with our graduate students and faculty to find ways to minimize Harvard's impact on the environment," said David E. Harris Jr., general manager of transportation services at Harvard. "Regarding alternative fuel sources, we explored everything from electric vehicles to compressed natural gas and ethanol as fuel sources. In the end, we found that the most cost-effective and environmentally friendly method was biodiesel. It's part of a concerted effort to move sustainability forward at Harvard."

Leaded and unleaded

Biodiesel comes in two forms: B100, which is a pure fuel made either from soybean oil or even "yellow grease," like canola oil, animal fats or other cooking oils; or a blended biodiesel which incorporates ratios of diesel fuel. Harvard has adopted B20 (20 percent soybean-based biodiesel and 80 percent diesel fuel) for use in, according to Harris, "shuttle buses, dining service delivery vehicles, solid waste and recycling trucks, John Deere tractors and snow-removal vehicles."

Harris said that emission studies conducted on Harvard vehicles since the conversion in February show 20 percent reductions in both unburned hydrocarbons and sulfur, and 12 percent reductions in carbon monoxide and particulate matter.

"In addition, our vehicles have experienced no reduction in fuel economy, and due to the increased lubricity that comes with using biodiesel, we're currently testing the oil in our vehicles to see if [using biodiesel] will allow us to extend the period between oil changes," he said.





Perhaps most impressively, the conversion of diesel vehicles over to biodiesel requires nothing more than filling up at a different pump.

"There is no additional modification needed to the existing equipment," said Harris. "The only significant expense incurred during the switch was that we had to install an on-campus fueling site. You can't buy biodiesel locally, so we needed to be able to pump our own fuel."


Thus, Harvard spent \$50,000 to build a fuel tank and pumping station at 155 North Harvard St. in Allston, an above-ground, environmentally safe structure fully permitted and approved by city agencies. And even that investment, according to Harris, should be paid back within the first three years.

"A benefit for us was that we were able to shift from buying fuel retail to buying it wholesale. The money we save on the approximately 100,000 gallons of gas we use per year should make up for the cost of the fueling station."

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