

BUSINESS

Restaurant waste oil becomes hot commodity for thieves

By **Alex McCarthy**
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 06/18/2008 06:37:40 AM MDT

As a decline in consumer spending curbs restaurant patronage, grease recyclers are seeing their already-diminishing supply drop even further with thefts leaving slim pickings at the bottom of the barrel.

The companies typically collect and sell used cooking oil — known as yellow grease — for recycling or to rendering companies for livestock-feed additives. Some companies pay restaurants for the grease, while others charge for ridding them of the waste.

But rising prices and demand from those who use it to power biodiesel vehicles have made the grease stored in drums outside restaurants an increasingly sought-after commodity.

"The increase in grease theft is largely driven by its economic value, which is driven by



(EL) bzxxbiodiesel12b Brian Sugg of Rocky Mountain Sustainable Enterprises in Boulder measures a barrel of "B" grade used cooking oil to make sure it is full enough for transport from Aurelio's Pizza in Denver. Joe Amon, The Denver Post (THE DENVER POST | JOE AMON)

the rising cost of fuel," said DeWayne Perry, chief operating officer for Boulder-based Rocky Mountain Sustainable Enterprises, which collects grease from restaurants all over the Front Range.

His son, Aaron Perry, the company's chief executive, said he's seen incidents of disappearing grease double in the past year, leaving behind broken locks, spills on the street and growing liability concerns for restaurants.

Jerry Hermosillo, one of two drivers for Denver-based Jerry & Son Grease Recycling, said the pair collects 20 to 30 barrels a day but theft has threatened that flow.

"It has definitely picked up within the last couple months," Hermosillo said.

Jerry & Son buys grease for \$5 to \$10 a barrel. Grease sells for about \$30 a barrel to a rendering company, Hermosillo said.

Coloradans were paying an average of \$4.74 for diesel Tuesday, making the kitchen waste a hot commodity for people like Dana Knight. Knight has been brewing biodiesel in his Boulder garage for three years, using grease he collects from restaurants he has agreements with.

He has noticed a shortage too.

"There are more people making biodiesel, so the restaurants who are willing to work with our smaller needs are largely spoken for," Knight said.

He collects grease for free, but his containers are much smaller than the 55-gallon drums commercial recyclers put out.

Pete Contos, owner of Denver's seven Pete's restaurants, said his grease collector asked him several weeks ago to keep an eye on his barrels, for which he gets \$30 each time they are emptied.

Pete Meersman, president of the Colorado Restaurant Association, said he hasn't heard of any thefts from his members, but that's not surprising to DeWayne Perry.

"It's kind of the equivalent of someone stealing your garbage — it doesn't register very high on your radar," he said.

With barrels coming up empty and no one to blame, grease-pumping and recycling companies are pointing fingers at one another, Hermosillo said.

DeWayne Perry said his company is in the midst of legal proceedings against grease thieves, both small home brewers and commercial companies that were caught stealing from its barrels.

"When we first came across this, we were much softer," he said. "Our posture has changed to very hard-line."

Alex McCarthy: 303-954-1381 or amccarthy@denverpost.com



Brian Sugg of Rocky Mountain Sustainable Enterprises in Boulder rolls a barrel of 'used' cooking oil from a restaurant onto his truck. As more people turn to biofuel to combat high gas prices, the oil is seeing increased theft. (Photos by Joe Amon, The Denver Post)