

OPIS: Biofuels Update: Renewable Diesel 'Extraordinarily Important' for a Greener NYC: Official

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The advent of renewable diesel has been "extraordinarily important" to New York City's environmental efforts, a city official said Monday.

"I think renewable diesel is a fascinating opportunity," Keith Kerman, deputy commissioner of the city's Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS), said during an interview in his office. "I think there's enormous, enormous growth opportunity for this."

"We all want a transportation system that is zero at the tailpipe, but the reality is you're going to be using liquid fuels for a while, for years and years to come, probably decades, in trucks and heavy equipment. And so if you can have a more-beneficial fuel, better at greenhouse gas reduction, better in air quality, no smell ... why not do that?"

DCAS this year transitioned the busiest municipal ferry system in the country to renewable diesel, using about 5 million gal per year of the fuel to move more than 45,000 daily Staten Island Ferry riders. More than 2 million gal have been used since the June startup, according to Kerman.

DCAS is working with other agencies to expand the use of the fuel across the city's marine operations, including the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the New York City Police Department Harbor Patrol, NYC Parks marinas and the New York City Fire Department.

"At this point, Department of Transportation (DOT) vessels, the ferries in the parks department, the marina vessels are all on renewable diesel," Kerman said.

"The Harbor Patrol, the fire boats and the New York City ferry have all begun introducing renewable diesel."

"We've set a goal of having complete renewable diesel by the end of next year in all the vessel programs, and so far, so good."

The city's efforts to combat the effect of greenhouse gases extend to the land as well. In October, it announced that the 15 million gal per year used by the entirety of its heavy-duty fleet and off-road vehicles had completed the transition to renewable diesel, making New York "the first major East Coast city to implement the green technology at such a large scale."

"It transitions 12,500 vehicles and other equipment to clean fuel, replacing 16 million gallons of fossil fuel," the city stated at the time. "This will reduce our carbon dioxide emissions by 162 million pounds each year."

Kerman said that the fleet includes "the sanitation trucks, the fire engines, the ambulances, the parks department, forestry vehicles, the DOT street-paving and repair vehicles, the DEP water and sewer-cleaning vehicles, plus all the off-road stuff: tractors and front-end loaders and snow melters and shippers, generators -- the whole universe of off-road support equipment."

The fleet's fuel is actually 95% renewable diesel, according to Kerman.

"We mix with 5% biodiesel because that's actually a better operating mix," he explained, attributing the improvement to "lubricity."

"Biodiesel is also a little less expensive, but it's actually an operating mix that was advised to us," he added.

By July 2026, all city trucks and vessels are to use renewable diesel and be powered by used cooking oil and waste tallow.

Kerman cited other unexpected benefits to the fuel's use.

"One of the other real surprises that we didn't totally recognize at first was the workplace safety and workplace health aspect of renewable diesel," he recalled.

"Renewable diesel has no smell. It has no benzene. It has no cancer-causing aromatics.

"So just at a workplace issue, our mechanics, our commercial drivers, of which we have thousands, no longer have to work in foul-smelling environments."

By June, the city had used 27 million gal of renewable diesel across its fleet and ferries, it said, but that figure has increased in the meantime to 37 million gal, according to Kerman.

He said that the renewable diesel is transported by barge from Louisiana.

"I think 93% is used cooking oil and waste animal fats," Kerman stated. "We use a small percentage, 5% to 6%, of soybean oil."

The contract for trucks and off-road equipment is with Brooklyn-based Approved Oil, which currently uses Diamond Green Diesel, a joint venture between Valero and Darling Ingredients, as its renewable diesel supplier.

The original term was from Aug. 1, 2023, through July 31, 2025. "We are currently in renewing through July 31, 2026," Kerman said.

The ferry contract is with Sprague, with a term of March 18, 2025, through March 17, 2028.

"There is also a potential one-year renewal with that contract," Kerman stated.

New York's efforts to be greener stretch back for years.

"We set a 2025 goal back in 2015 during the Paris Climate Accords," Kerman said. "The city announced that its goal was 50% greenhouse gas reduction by 2025 for the city fleet, and so we are right where we want to be."

The goal expands to 80% by 2035.

DCAS also manages the city's heating oil program that as of July 1 of this year mandated that 10% of all heating oil be biodiesel. Kerman seems to be looking beyond that, however.

"We've been using B10 for three, four years already," he claimed. "B20 is not mandated until July 1 of 2030, but we do plan to start using B20 earlier than that."

Until then, DCAS will continue to look for improvements, according to Kerman.

"Renewable diesel has not really been implemented in heating oil yet," he stated, "but we're interested in that question."