

# THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN BIODIESEL

Biographical Accounts Celebrate 30 Years of Pioneers, Leaders, and the Bold Vision of the  
**National Biodiesel Board**

Ron Kotrba



## Keith Kerman

*“I’d like to think we’ve played a role—an unexpected role—helping to build this industry and promoting a partnership between a progressive big city and farmers in the heartland to move us forward on clean, domestic, sustainable, renewable fuels and energy independence for this country.”*

—Keith Kerman

Whether it’s Bioheat® fuel or B20-powered garbage trucks, biodiesel in the Big Apple is the perfect country-meets-city story. It was a relationship fostered for a long time by soybean farmers and associations such as Nebraska Soybean, USB, and others. With years of demonstrations and countless fleet-vehicle miles under its belt, NBB was in a good position to show that biodiesel was ready for the big city—and the biggest fleet in the country. What better person, then, to nurture, protect, and sustain that relationship today than Keith Kerman, the chief fleet officer for New York City. He understands farm life. More importantly, he knows biodiesel is an all-round good-performing fuel, from its environmental characteristics to performance, and for what it means to farmers and their rural hometowns.

“I grew up in Massachusetts, along a small family farm,” recounts Kerman. “I’ve always had an appreciation for farming. We would pick



Kerman accepts the Eye on Biodiesel Influence award on behalf of the city of New York.

corn. It's a very different life than kids growing up in New York City." Kerman has a deep-rooted desire to be as supportive as he can to farmers—the backbone of food, feed, and biofuel production.

A Harvard graduate, Kerman began his career of government service in 1994 under the Rudy Giuliani mayoral administration. Since then, he's helped implement fleet and operational policy "across three mayors of the entire political spectrum—Republican (Giuliani), Democrat (Bill de Blasio) and Michael Bloomberg, who at different times has been a Republican, Democrat, and Independent."

Kerman was appointed to the newly created position of chief fleet officer by Mayor Bloomberg in 2011 and was reappointed to the position by Mayor de Blasio. Prior to this, he had spent 17 years in the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

In the mid-2000s, Kerman was first introduced to biodiesel when the park commissioner visited their alma mater in Vermont, where students were abuzz with it. The commissioner asked Kerman to investigate, and he did. Kerman invited representatives of a company to speak about biodiesel at a longtime annual fleet show. Subsequently, the idea of a pilot project using biodiesel in a few select city parks-department vehicles was floated and began to take shape. The company donated B100 for the project, and the fuel was used in 15 garbage trucks on Staten Island.

"We had a really good experience with it," notes Kerman. From there, a biodiesel program was developed. "The parks department has about 1,100 [diesel] trucks and other units, and biodiesel seemed like a great thing to pursue." Allowance of B5 use was written into standard contracts, with options to increase the blend. "So, we rolled out B5 for all vehicles—in the trucking fleet, on- and off-road—and it worked fine. There were no issues, and the costs were comparable."

From there, the parks department began using B20. "We made that big jump very quickly," Kerman recalls. "We were using it in the winter, too." For three years, B20 was used year-round. Political transition periods, however, require caution, and B20 use was scaled back to B5 for a few months. "Snow removal is a sensitive public service," he explains, adding that they didn't want a new administration to

learn about biodiesel through a problem with snow removal—even though the likelihood of that happening was slim to none.

“The parks department became a role model for using biodiesel,” recounts Kerman. “And it pushed biodiesel use in heating oil too.” In 2010, the city council passed a citywide Bioheat® fuel mandate starting in October 2012 with 2 percent biodiesel. This was a monumental achievement for biodiesel and heralded greater acceptance of the emerging heating-oil market as a new home to volumes of the renewable fuel.

A year before the citywide mandate was passed, and three years before it went into effect, the parks department began using B5 in heating oil. “We thought, if we can use it in vehicles, why not in heating oil?” recalls Kerman. “By the time I left parks, we were using B20 in almost all heating-oil tanks—with a few exceptions.”

Despite his passion and dedication to alternative fuels and biodiesel, Kerman believes his appointment to the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services as the city’s chief fleet officer had nothing to do with sustainable fleets. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008–’09, the focus was strictly fiscal management. “We needed a deep dive into city government, reengineering it to save money. A report was issued, defining five areas where there could be extra cost savings.”

He explains how on a good year, the city can spend a billion dollars on fleets. “We have 2,000 full time fleet staff, 80,000 drivers, 30,000 vehicles, and 100 garage facilities. It’s a big part of the city government that was not centrally managed.”

The process to overhaul city government under Bloomberg took two years, and Kerman represented the parks department. “Bloomberg then appointed me to implement a consolidation and citywide management program. There was mention of developing a clean-fleet plan in the executive order that defined my job—I know this because I put it in—but it was clearly not the focus of my appointment or work. It was a consolidation program, cost-savings.” His work resulted in more than \$350 million in savings to the city. “There was literally four lines about a green-fleet plan. All of my jobs were about efficiencies and reengineering.”

In 2013, local laws required the use of B20 in the summer and B5 in the winter. Emergency services were exempt, “but the truth is all of them used it,” Kerman notes. “And even though B20 was not required in the wintertime, we used a lot of it in the winter.”

The same is true for heating oil. In 2013, all city-government buildings were required to use B5. “That came directly out of our parks-department work, which is now law.”

Under Mayor de Blasio, the concept of citywide sustainability became more of a focus, remembers Kerman. “We rolled out biodiesel across all agencies.” This includes emergency services, where sensitivities are extraordinarily high. “The police department is using B10 across the board. The department of corrections, they’re using B20 at Rikers Island. The sanitation department is a great supporter of B20.” With every passing year, he adds, total volumes of biodiesel consumed, and percentages, are increasing.

Kerman mentions a broader law for all New York City buildings, public and private. “We have a pathway for B20 for all buildings by 2035. Just as the parks department was ahead of the city on biodiesel use, we now want the city to be ahead of everyone else regarding going to higher blends of biodiesel in heating oil. By the end of [2021], we’ll have done mostly B10 across the board. And then B20. We always want to be ahead, to show what we can do and be a model to say, ‘We’ve been doing this for years and here’s how it can work.’”

Kerman adds that B50 pilots were launched 10 years ago in Staten Island and Central Park. “This certainly got more complicated when the federal government issued revised underground storage-tank procedures. But now, we’re doing a project in Staten Island to certify and use B50. That is playing out this summer. It has taken years—and I mean years—to go through the whole process.”

A great partnership has developed between the New York City Fire Department and NBB. In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, when emergency services in New York City were under extraordinary stress as the city was a major epicenter of the disease, NBB and farmers supported firefighters with meals. “These nice programs recognize New York City was going through a tough time,” explains

Kerman, “and it was to say, ‘Hey, we are all in this boat together.’ It has become a nice partnership.”

Biodiesel, Kerman argues, is a powerful tool that can help bridge political divisions. “I’m really, really interested in seeing a partnership develop across political lines and blue states and red states. I grew up in a rural area, a red area of a blue state—Massachusetts—so I don’t see this in the way other people might see it. I grew up with people who remind me of the people I meet when I talk to Iowa farmers.”

Kerman sees great potential for growing this partnership between New York City and the Midwest and, consequently, to help bridge the growing divide between red and blue states. “We want to support our farmers. We think it’s a really nice marriage of environmental issues, the domestic economy, and energy independence. It shows we have common interests. We’re all Americans.”

In 2011, NBB recognized New York City’s support for biodiesel and presented the city with its annual Eye on Biodiesel Influence Award. Kerman accepted the award on behalf of the city. “I’m a parks guy, and I came to New York City government because of my commitment to public service. I have interest in management and a strong commitment to environmental stewardship. But I’m truly a parks guy. I’m not a fleet guy or building guy. I’ve tried to push for environmental solutions on a practical level. My job every day is to make sure our vehicles work. I’m incredibly proud of our work in biofuels and our partnership with NBB to prove biodiesel works in vehicles and buildings. We’ve used more than 400 million blended gallons of biodiesel so far. I’d like to think we’ve played a role—an unexpected role—helping to build this industry and promoting a partnership between a progressive big city and farmers in the heartland to move us forward on clean, domestic, sustainable, renewable fuels, and energy independence for this country.”

Developing this incredible partnership, however, would have been difficult were it not for the plethora of early and ongoing demonstrations that proved, time and time again, that biodiesel worked—and worked well.

A blue-tinted photograph capturing a crowd of people at night. The word "DIESEL" is projected in large, glowing, white letters across the middle of the frame. The silhouettes of several people are visible in the foreground, looking towards the projection. A bright, diagonal light beam cuts across the upper portion of the image, adding to the dramatic atmosphere.

**DIESEL**

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the National Biodiesel Board, in particular Donnell Rehagen and Doug Whitehead, for entrusting me with this important project celebrating the association's 30th anniversary by recognizing its founders and those without whom many of us would not have made their careers in this field; the dozens of the wonderful people I interviewed for this book, first for having done what they've done and, second, for sharing with me their personal recollections, time, and insights; with special mentions to John Campbell, Kenlon Johannes, Martin Mittelbach, Kirk Leeds, and Karen Long for sending me a wealth of significant, early documents that helped recreate events, timelines, and industry accomplishments for my journey in this endeavor; the fantastic crew at BDI-BioEnergy International in Austria for hosting me in Vienna in 2016 and opening my eyes to Austria's, and BDI's, preeminence in the early development of waste-based biodiesel, for their avid support of my new *Biobased Diesel*<sup>™</sup> venture and my work, and for the valued friendships we have cultivated over the years; Bob and Kelly King for being different, and for their unwavering support of *Biobased Diesel*<sup>™</sup>; Joe Jobe for all he's done for American biodiesel in his longtime role as NBB CEO, and since then—he is one of the most ardent biodiesel supporters alive—and for his friendship; Sen. Chuck Grassley for all his biodiesel championing over the years, and for giving me the honor of speaking with him, despite how busy he is, a number of times throughout my career; Paul Nazzaro for believing in me from the start and allowing me the honor of working with such a pioneer in this space, and for his funny stories, friendship, and trust; my mom and step-dad, Judy and Everett Sawyer, for instilling in me a strong work ethic and values for which I can never repay them, and for their love and consistent support—even when I didn't deserve it; and last on this list but first in my heart, my fiancée and life partner Jaryn Allen who, with her full support and without hesitation, backed my decision to leave my longtime employer, encouraging me to forge a new path on my own. Thank you all, with the utmost sincerity.



## About the Author

Ron Kotrba was raised in south-east Virginia and graduated high school in 1992 with an advanced studies diploma from the Virginia Beach Public Schools system. At age 17, Kotrba entered an auto-body repair apprenticeship in Norfolk, Virginia, under the tutelage of James Gregg with Classic Coachworks Unlimited until 1994, when he enrolled in classes at Tidewater Community College in Virginia Beach.



After earning an associate's degree in general studies, graduating with *cum laude* distinction, Kotrba moved to Mid-Michigan in 1996. In 1997, he was accepted as a junior at Michigan State University in East Lansing. While at university, Kotrba worked the overnight shift at a fueling station and convenience store in Owosso, and wrote for a weekly newspaper in Shiawassee County, *The Sunday Independent*.

Graduating from Michigan State University in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies, Kotrba went on to become an advanced engineering laboratory technician in the early 2000s for an OEM exhaust supplier, where he performed developmental, analytical work on diesel aftertreatment systems including diesel oxidation catalysts, diesel particulate filters, selective catalytic reduction systems, and lean NOx traps. In late 2004, Kotrba moved to northwest Minnesota, to where his ancestors emigrated from Bohemia in the late 1800s.

In January 2005, Kotrba was hired by BBI International based in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where he began as a staff writer for *Ethanol Producer Magazine* and *Biodiesel Magazine*. In 2007, BBI launched *Biomass Magazine* and Kotrba was part of the editorial team that helped make that publication a success. Also in 2007, Kotrba became senior writer for all of BBI's publications.

In 2009, Kotrba took over editorship of *Biodiesel Magazine* and continued to manage all aspects of that product line until August 2020. In 2010, BBI launched *Biorefining* magazine, a publication that focused on advanced fuels and biobased chemicals. Adding to his duties as editor of *Biodiesel Magazine*, Kotrba also edited and managed *Biorefining*, in addition to the biannual publication *Algae Technology & Business*.

The year 2011 was perhaps one of Kotrba's most prolific while under BBI's employ, as he oversaw the production of 26 print magazines (12 *Biodiesel Magazine*, 12 *Biorefining*, and two *Algae Technology & Business*) while helping to organize, attend, and speak at a record number of events.

While *Biorefining* and *Algae Technology & Business* were short-lived, Kotrba continued to write, edit, and manage *Biodiesel Magazine* and, in early 2015, rejoined *Biomass Magazine* and *Pellet Mill Magazine* as senior editor, where he remained until 2020.

Under the authority of BBI, Kotrba developed the Biodiesel Production Technology Summit—including all aspects, from the name and agenda to the speaker line-up—the inaugural convening of which was originally set for June 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Once the coronavirus pandemic hit, however, the event was postponed until late August and moved to Omaha, Nebraska. As the summer spike in COVID-19 cases surged, the summit was again postponed until September 2020 and moved to a virtual platform. Kotrba and BBI International parted ways before the virtual conference took place.

In 2019, Kotrba was honored by the National Biodiesel Board for his years of trusted coverage of the biodiesel industry, receiving the distinguished Eye on Biodiesel Influence Award.

Kotrba founded RonKo Media Productions LLC in 2020 and currently serves as editor and publisher of the *Biobased Diesel*<sup>™</sup> suite of media products, including *Biobased Diesel*<sup>™</sup> *Daily* (biobased-diesel.com), a next-generation source of online news, information, and perspective on biodiesel, renewable diesel, and sustainable aviation fuel; *Biobased Diesel*<sup>™</sup> *Weekly*, an e-newsletter sent free of charge to

subscribers every Tuesday morning; and *Biobased Diesel*<sup>™</sup>, a print magazine launched in Summer 2021.

In addition to publishing the *Biobased Diesel*<sup>™</sup> line of products, RonKo Media Productions is a for-hire writing and editing firm servicing the biofuels, agriculture, energy, and process-technology industries. Kotrba is also a biofuels contributor to, and associate editor of, *Render* magazine. He has contributed articles to a number of publications—including *Missouri Soybean Farmer* magazine, *Indoor Comfort Marketing*, and others—and organizations since establishing RonKo Media Productions in August 2020.

