Our Voice: Don’t put limits on biodiesel production

March 19, 2014

Tuesday was National Biodiesel Day, celebrating the birth of Rudolf Christian Karl Diesel in 1858.

When you think of diesel, images of black smoke billowing from old school buses may come to mind. However, as actress Daryl Hannah pointed out in the Southern California Energy Summit in October in Palm Springs, Diesel’s original engine was designed to run on peanut oil. It wasn’t until his death in 1913 that fossil fuels became the major component in diesel.

The modern biodiesel movement has been going strong since the establishment of Renewable Energy Standards in 2005, which set goals to reduce greenhouse gases, diversify the national fuel supply and reduce dependence on foreign oil. It also got a boost from California’s goal of generating a third of its power from renewable sources by 2020.

Biodiesel production increased 63 percent in the past two years, from 1.1 billion gallons in 2012 to 1.8 billion in 2013. Production continues to accelerate, according to the National Biodiesel Board, an industry trade group. In a recent Desert Sun commentary, Jennifer Case of New Leaf Biofuel in San Diego said that the past six months of the year the pace of production reached the 2 billion-gallon annual mark.

Imperial Western Products in Coachella is a significant player in the industry. Last year, it produced 8 million gallons of biodiesel from cooking oil collected from restaurants in the Coachella Valley, other parts of California and Arizona and southern Nevada.

Putting the oil that makes our french fries and taco shells crispy to good use instead of dumping it into landfills is a great idea. According to the California Air Resources Board, fuel from cooking oil generates one-fifth or less greenhouse gases than diesel produced by California refineries.

There’s also vast potential in producing cellular oil from algae harvested from the Salton Sea, according to research by the Scripps Institute of Oceanography and San Diego State University.

As supply has grown, so has demand. US Airways and other airlines have been experimenting with a blend of soybean oil and diesel that reduces emissions and extends the life of the engine.

It seems the sky is the limit for biodiesel.

However, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has proposed to hold 2014 and 2015 production to 2013 levels. It says it wants to cap biofuels as part of a revision of the Renewable Fuels Standard to accommodate the ethanol “blend wall,” requiring that ethanol comprise 10 percent of gasoline.

Joe Jobe of the National Biodiesel Board and Curtis Wright of Imperial Western both contend that with no blend wall, biodiesel can help offset the limits of ethanol. It makes no sense to limit biodiesel no matter what is happening with ethanol.

And Jennifer Case of New Leaf Biofuels points out the irony that as a senator Barack Obama proposed the Alternative Diesel Standard, a bipartisan proposal to replace fossil fuels with cleaner, American biodiesel. She speculates that as president he may be influenced by oil and gas industry lobbies. It also is

possible he is being pressured by lawmakers from Midwestern states that grow the corn to produce ethanol.

The Desert Sun joins Case in encouraging President Obama to lift the limits proposed by the EPA. Biodiesel is a critical part of the renewable energy picture. Its production and use should be encouraged. We’re certain Rudolf Diesel would agree.