

Featured Business Member of the Month

Croppers Oil & Gas / Maryland Biodiesel:

“We’ve Put EVERYTHING We Own - On The Line - For Renewable Energy!”

By Phila Hoopes

What does it take for a small family filling station in Berlin, MD, to become the first biodiesel processing plant in the state?

Simple: the investment of “Everything we have!” says Virginia “Ginger” Warren, co-owner of Croppers Oil & Gas and its offshoot, Maryland Biodiesel. “Everything we own is on the line here – the house, the car, everything.”

And, she says, the good news is that the investment appears to be paying off.

Maryland Biodiesel is the biodiesel supplier to the State Department of Transportation fleet on the Eastern Shore, and officials are looking at extending that status to cover the entire state. With a 1,500-gallon daily output (half a million gallons yearly), the processing plant currently supplies local distributors and farms, as well as the farmers and commuters who buy from the Croppers filling station.

Best of all, she says, they are spreading the word about the benefits of biodiesel. “For our grand opening, we bought chemistry kits for each high school in the surrounding area to teach them about biodiesel,” she says.

Ginger travels around the state speaking at schools, fairs, and other gatherings, while her husband, James, speaks before the Maryland legislature and state agencies.

Since they opened the processing plant in June, Maryland State Governor Robert Ehrlich, Baltimore Mayor and gubernatorial candidate Martin O’Malley, state senators, county commissioners, and a host of other politicians from both parties have visited the plant. “The wonderful thing,” says Ginger, “is that none of them have asked us about our political party – they know that this is a decision for the *state*, not a Democratic or Republican issue, but good for everyone.”

The Warrens hadn’t expected to become renewable energy advocates when they bought out Ginger’s father’s 27-year-old family fuel business in 1995. They had owned and operated the service station for nearly a decade when a customer asked if they carried biodiesel.

“We’d never heard of it,” says Ginger. “We did our homework, went to the first annual biodiesel convention, and realized that this was a good thing: the nation needs to head in the direction of renewable energy.”

Closing the propane portion of their business, the Warrens went in search of financing and material support to build a biodiesel processing plant.

Ultimately, the Farmer’s Bank of Willards, MD, researched biodiesel and concurred that “this was a good thing,” says Ginger. Pacific Biodiesel helped with the construction of the processing plant and provided the mentoring to run it.

Meanwhile, the Warrens were establishing connections with local soybean farmers and the monolithic Perdue chicken presence on the Eastern Shore. The raw feedstock would come from

the oil left over from grinding soybeans into mash to feed the Perdue poultry. “We’re happy to support the local farmers,” says Ginger. “We wish we could do more.”

Finally, after two years of preparation and \$300,000 invested, the Maryland Biodiesel facility opened in June, 2006, selling pure (B100) biodiesel, as well as B50 (50% biodiesel, 50% petrodiesel), and B20 blends.

Founded as a family business, Croppers/Maryland Biodiesel intends to stay that way. Co-owned by Ginger and James, the biodiesel facility is managed by their son-in-law Kevin Timmons, with their son J. Brian Warren – soon to graduate from Salisbury State University as a finance major – serving as CFO.

Their experience in running a family business deeply influences their marketing approach. “We get emails and calls from people every day, asking us to bring biodiesel to them,” says Ginger. “We tell them to contact their local distributors and ask them to call us. A lot of these distributors are small family businesses, and we would never dream of taking business away from them.”

Just since their June opening, Maryland Biodiesel has sold their product to three Eastern Shore distributors: Tri-Gas and Oil, Tilghman Oil, and Mid Eastern Oil Company.

What are their plans for the future? Additional sources of feedstock, for one thing: they are beginning to test a new process using recycled vegetable oil from restaurants. “We send samples for testing to see if it meets the ASTM 6751 specs (American Society for Testing and Materials standards govern the chemical makeup and quality of biodiesel). So far everything is perfect, praise God – we want to sell a quality product.”

Further down the road, the Warrens plan to expand their plant, doubling its output from 1,500 gallons/day to twice that amount.

One thing is certain: They’ll continue to promote biodiesel in as many venues as possible. “Smell this, and this,” Ginger says as she holds two small vials up to a visitor’s nose. “This one contains diesel, and this is biodiesel...”

“Which would you rather smell in your future?”

For more information on Maryland Biodiesel, visit www.mdbiodiesel.com

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