

# Helping clear the air



RICHARD GREEN/BUSINESS 101

Jeff Colt Jr. looks Oct. 25 inside one of the 2,000-gallon tanks at the Energy Alternative Solutions plant under construction in Gonzales.

## *Biofuel plant gets ready to open in Gonzales this month*

By **ALLA KATSNELSON**  
The Salinas Californian

With a new, \$1.3 million biofuel plant set to open in Gonzales late this month, the air in Monterey County might soon be getting a little cleaner.

The facility — the first of its kind on the Central Coast and only the third in California — will produce about 2.5 million gallons per year of a biodegradable and clean fuel to power local tractors, freight trucks and

school buses.

Most large commercial vehicles run on diesel fuel, and in a region such as Monterey County, with its \$3.3 billion agriculture industry, diesel use is especially high. But diesel exhaust is one of the most dangerous forms of pollution, both for the environment and for human lungs.

For the founders of Watsonville-based Energy Alternative Solutions, which is launching the Gonzales plant, the solution was to create a source of biodiesel, an environmentally friendly form of diesel made by chemically altering vegetable oil or animal fat to remove glycerine in a process called “transesterification.” The plant will produce pure biodiesel that can be mixed with traditional

petroleum-based diesel.

“What motivated us were real concerns about pollution and greenhouse gases,” said Richard Gillis, the firm’s chief executive officer, citing research linking child asthma rates in California with pollutants from vehicle exhaust. “It was obvious to us that something needed to be done.”

Gillis and the two other members of EAS’s executive team, Bernie Weiss, vice president of business development, and Marco Vinicio Vides, chief financial officer, also came together on another matter.

“We don’t like the idea that foreign influence can be brought to bear on our social, political and economical well-being because of oil,” Gillis said.

The seed for EAS was planted just

after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. At the tail end of a conference on small business partnerships between California and Mexico, Gillis recalled, “We were sitting in a bar in Guadalajara, Mexico, talking about 9/11 and found ourselves talking about biofuels.”

Gillis, Weiss and Vides pursued the project part-time until officially incorporating EAS in February. Like many early-stage startups, they have not sought venture funding, but raised the needed capital themselves. Translation: “We mortgaged our houses,” Weiss said wryly.

But they’re convinced the market is ripe for the investment to pay off.

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