Vegetable oil fuels cars -- and tax bills

By Evan Haipar, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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Dave Eck, a Half Moon Bay mechanic, had attracted a media spotlight with his fleet of vehicles fueled by used fryer grease from a local chowder house. So when Sacramento called, he figured officials wanted advice on promoting alternative fuels.

Not at all. The government rang to notify Eck that he was a tax cheat. He was scolded for failing to pay taxes for every gallon of kitchen oil he burned, according to spokesman Matt Deegan.

Eck, who drives a Hummer converted to run on vegetable oil, "said, 'Not a problem. I'll do my part.' But what do I get? At least let me into the carpool lane.'"

"All of a sudden they nailed me for a road tax," said Eck, who drives a Hummer converted to run on vegetable oil. "I said, 'Not a problem. I'll do my part. But what do I get? At least let me into the carpool lane.'"

No such luck. The state offered Eck only a potentially large fine -- and not just for failing to pay taxes. He can also get in trouble for carting kitchen grease away from eateries without a license from the state Meat and Poultry Inspection Branch.

Or for not having at least $1 million in liability insurance, in case he spills some of the stuff. Or for not getting permission from the state Air Resources Board to burn fat in the first place.

The regulations are so burdensome that even Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, trying to set an example for Californians by driving a Hummer that burns cooking oil he buys at Costco, had not complied. Schwarzenegger, who has said that the exhaust from his Hummer smells so much like French fries that his passengers get hunger pangs, was unaware that he was required to send Sacramento an 18-cent road tax for every gallon of kitchen oil he burned, according to spokesman Aaron Mclear. After The Times raised the issue, Mclear said the governor would pay the taxes he owed.

The governor's staff says it is working on making it easier to drive using vegetable oil without being an outlaw.

"We are very interested in making sure people who have these kinds of vehicles are able to comply as easily as possible," Mclear said.