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### Harvesting Fields of Fuel

As Joshua Tickell's now-epic filmmaking journey moves closer to completion, BDM caught up with the author/director, along with producer Greg Reitman, as the duo were fresh off a final round of globetrotting biodiesel shoots, capturing the last footage—and some of the most powerful images yet—for their trailblazing documentary film.

By Kory Wallen

When Joshua Tickell spoke with Biodiesel Magazine nine months ago, he said the meaning and significance of the feature-length documentary film he's shooting changes almost daily. "I am continually reevaluating what 'Fields of Fuel' is creatively," he said, explaining that the film is a pliable reflection of a volatile, ever-changing energy-dependent world.

In a year that brought record-high oil prices, a U.S. energy bill calling for expanded use of biofuels and natural disasters that exposed the acute vulnerability of America's energy infrastructure, it is no surprise that Tickell kept his cameras rolling.

Indeed, the scope and gravity of "Fields of Fuel" has changed since Biodiesel Magazine first met with Tickell and the film's producer Greg Reitman in February. In the midst of their shooting schedule this summer, several unforeseen events—some remarkable, some catastrophic—transpired and subsequently became crucial to the film. And while the film is probably a few months behind schedule, it has moved into post-production.

Now working away in his tiny editing room, Tickell has logged over 250 hours of raw and archival footage from the last decade. "As you get into editing, you start to see holes in the film," Tickell said. "I now know where the holes are, and I know we have a couple of little shoots to do to fill those gaps." Tickell would like one of those "little shoots" to be done in the one of the world's largest biofuels-producing nations, Brazil. "We are setting our sites on doing a shoot in Brazil because both the biodiesel and ethanol industries are exploding down there," Tickell said.

Tickell and Reitman didn't classify the film as off schedule—just that they have extended the film's reach and refuse to put arbitrary timelines on the project. To be fair, Tickell did just complete another book, Biodiesel America, in which the author talks with authorities from around the world about the ills of petroleum dependence and the hope of biodiesel (www.biodieselaamerica.org). Plus, the events of this past summer pushed Tickell's shooting schedule and post-production timeline back a few months. The passage of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, which carried with it a federal renewable fuels standard that changed the face of the biofuels industry, requiring the use of 7.5 billion gallons of ethanol and biodiesel in the U.S. fuel supply by 2012, was the first big development. Then came record-high fuel prices, which, coupled with the biodiesel federal excise tax exemption, created unprecedented demand for biodiesel nationwide. Finally, the devastating effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused oil refinery shutdowns—which only exacerbated high fuel costs and exposed the fragility of the nation's transportation fuel supply chain.

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It was as if a perfect energy storm had formed over America, and there was the "Fields of Fuel" crew in position to capture it all on film. In the aftermath of Katrina, Tickell, who is originally from Baton Rouge, La., started organizing a relief effort with the help of his non-profit VeggieVan organization. "We filled (two) vessels with biodiesel and [loaded] them with 15,000 tons of food and supplies," Tickell said. For 10 days, Tickell and the crew traveled across the Gulf of



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Mexico and up the mouth of the Mississippi River, delivering necessities to hurricane victims. Much of the collaborative effort was captured on film and will likely be featured in the final cut of the documentary.

Tickell said that by extending filming to include the passage of the energy bill, America's response to record-high oil prices and the post-hurricane demand for fuel, the film is stronger and more comprehensive than before. "[By delaying post-production], the film has gone from great to phenomenal," Tickell said. "One of the hardest skills that a documentary filmmaker learns is when to stop filming."

Currently, over 95 percent of the film has been shot and has moved into post-production, but the final release date is yet to be determined,

Reitman said. "We are moving quite aggressively and would like to be done in May, but on a very practical level, the film will be done in September," Reitman explained. Tickell and Reitman both said they hope the 90-minute piece will be ready in time for many of the 2006 film festivals.

Reitman has not been overly involved in the post-production aspects of the film. In the first year of his business partnership with Tickell, Reitman dedicated himself exclusively to "Fields of Fuel." Now in his second year with the project, Reitman has given some of his time back to other pursuits but remains engaged with the film. By stepping back during the film's final post-production stretch, Reitman is ensuring that Tickell's independent, creative vision comes through in the final cut. "Like I said in the beginning, it's his film," the producer said.

#### A global view of renewables

The "Fields of Fuel" team, typically a crew of six, spent most of the past summer traveling the world. Their journey started with a biofuels conference in Portugal early this summer. The team was able to land some key interviews with international leaders—among them, Matthew Simmons, energy advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney, who was accompanied by consultants to the oil and finance industries. "[They] distinctly summarized the fact that we are currently at all-time peak oil production," Tickell said. "From this point on, [the world] will be producing less oil each year."

The team's next stop was a tour of Germany. The filmmaker focused on German gas stations that were selling biodiesel, including B100. "We spent most of the time at gas stations speaking to motorists running their vehicles on B100," Tickell said, explaining that roughly one out of every 20 stations had B100 available, and Germans are taking advantage of the fuel. "Volkswagen is very supportive of biodiesel in Germany, but the more high-class car manufacturers see it more as a people's fuel and haven't made steps towards embracing it with the full authority Volkswagen has."

The crew eventually returned to the United States, shooting once again in the Midwest and northern California. "We essentially did a 19-day road trip all the way from Los Angeles to Louisiana (pre-Katrina), up to Missouri across the great plains to Colorado and back to Los Angeles," said Reitman, who traveled with Tickell during most of the filming. While trekking across America, the team spoke with officials from the California Air Research Board, as well as a variety of oil company executives, and made a stop at an elementary school to talk with students about renewable energy. "We really got the kids excited about biodiesel," Reitman said.

Unfortunately, the crew's latest U.S. expedition was capped off by the Gulf Coast hurricanes, which Tickell responded to almost immediately.

#### Documenting a changing world

"Fields of Fuel" has perhaps evolved beyond Tickell's original concept, but the promise of biodiesel and the focus on renewable energy remains principal to the film. Tickell explained how documentary filmmaking is the documentation of real life. "You can't script real life," he said. "It involves change. We are documenting a change (in energy), so there is bound to be some variability."

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