

Earth Matters: Waste-to-Fuel Heats Up Rockland

• by *Susan Hellauer*
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Earth Matters focuses on conservation, sustainability, recycling and healthy living. This weekly series is brought to you by *Maria Luisa Boutique* and *Strawtown Studio*.

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by Susan Hellauer

It's been three years since biofuel investment company New Planet Energy first proposed to build and run a municipal solid waste (MSW)-to-fuel gasification plant in Stony Point. From the start, the plan has drawn a range of strong reactions, from hope for an industrial revival to fear of odors, pollution and hellishly clogged roads.

Where does the plan—and this industry—stand now? Who's for, against, or on the fence? Here's what you need to know.

What is waste gasification?

There are many methods of [waste gasification](#). They generally use heat and chemicals to process carbon-based waste (like wood, vegetation or MSW) into a synthesis gas (or “syngas”) that can be used as transportation fuel or for energy production. The method that New Planet proposes for the Stony Point project is ThermoChem Recovery International’s (TRI) [Steam Reforming Gasification Process](#), which is meant to avoid the incineration byproducts of other heat-based waste-to-gas methods. Even so, there are processing “leftovers” with which to deal. The Stony Point plant would produce “clean” sulfur-free diesel fuel.

Where would this plant be located?

The Stony Point facility would be built at the end of Holt Drive, east of Route 9W, on the site of the former Kay-Fries chemical factory, a NY state [superfund site](#). The proposed 39-acre site is also near

the Town of Haverstraw borderline, and includes Cedar Pond Brook and Minisceongo Creek, tributaries of the Hudson River estuary.

The parcel is already zoned industrial, and divided by the CSX freight rail line. A new 1,000 megawatt “hot” power transport line will run parallel to the tracks, and require cooling stations. Besides the plant itself, the site would include tanks to store chemicals used in the gasification process, as well as up to 100,000 gallons of output diesel fuel.

Despite its industrial designation, the site is also close to a supermarket, a school, the Helen Hayes Hospital, residential neighborhoods, the Hudson River, and a riverine wetland.



Proposed gasification plant site [green star] bisected by CSX rail tracks. Hudson River at right, Helen Hayes Hospital at lower left. West Haverstraw Elementary School is light grey structure at bottom, left of center between two housing developments. ShopRite is large white structure left of rail tracks above the school. Image: Google Earth

Who will build and operate this plant?

NY Drop-in Biofuels, aka “New Planet Energy,” will work in conjunction with a local development company to construct the plant. [New Planet’s website](#) states that it is focusing its waste gasification projects on [New York State](#), “due to communities resisting landfill expansions.”

Under their site’s “[Projects](#)” tab, New Planet mentions only one previous plant, built in Vero Beach, Florida, along with the Stony Point project. New Planet’s website contains no phone number, email or street address. Earth Matters used their “Contact Us” form to request an interview, but received no response.

What is New Planet Energy’s track record for waste-to-biofuel success?

Short and not so good.

New Planet’s only completed gasification plant, in Vero Beach, Florida, was built in partnership with the Swiss chemical company [INEOS](#), and was shut down after only three years of operation. It was smaller in scale than the proposed Stony Point project, and used only vegetative landscape waste as its feedstock—not truckloads of urban trash. It suffered numerous breakdowns and problems, and was finally taken offline in 2016.

In January of this year, Florida newspaper [TCPalm](#) looked closely into the genesis, funding, and failure of the Vero Beach plant. They reported that New Planet had taken advantage of \$129 million in clean-energy government grants, loan guarantees, and other incentives to fund the doomed project—promised to be the first of many such plants across the country. The failure has left local taxpayers and officials fuming.



Defunct New Planet Energy/INEOS waste-to-fuel plant in Vero Beach, Fl. Image: Google Earth

What about the planned biofuel production? As the report states, when local business owner Jan Goodman of Genuine Bio-Fuel unsuccessfully attempted to purchase the operation's ethanol, it became apparent that **no usable fuel** was actually being produced and sold. Goodman, who had hoped to partner with the pioneering company, said: "This is happening in biofuels all across the country... nothing that was promised was delivered."

Are any MSW-to-biofuel plants using New Planet's proposed technology in commercial operation in the U.S. now?

Apparently not.

TRI has a small-scale steam-reformation waste-to-syngas **demonstration unit** that processes "renewable biomass" at its facility in Durham, N.C. It's not clear whether this unit processes MSW, or some other sort of carbonaceous waste, like wood chips, paper or vegetation. In any case, the Durham Solid Waste Management Department, City Manager and Public Relations office are not aware of this project. TRI did not respond to a request for further information.



Fulcrum BioEnergy's Sierra Project site, in the Nevada Desert. The plant is scheduled to come online in 2019, according to developer Fulcrum. Photo courtesy Fulcrum BioEnergy.

The steam reformation technology has also been leased to [Fulcrum Biofuels](#) for the Sierra Biofuels Plant, under development on a 19-acre desert site in Storey County, Nevada, 20 miles east of Reno. Fulcrum's quickly withdrawn Initial Public Offering (IPO) in 2011 stated that the Sierra Project would be [online by 2013](#). TRI's website states that the plant will be operational in 2017, but [Fulcrum's website](#) now puts the opening date in 2019. This project will process MSW into a jet fuel product. Lucrative [Defense Dept. grants](#) and [Dept. of Agriculture loan guarantees](#) for this project were lined up as early as 2013. Fulcrum Biofuels did not respond to requests for more information about the status of the Sierra Biofuels Plant.



Fulcrum's site sign declares that the Sierra Project will be "Our Country's First Waste-to-Biofuel [Plant]. Image courtesy Fulcrum BioEnergy

Will the Stony Point plant use Rockland County's MSW (which now is hauled—at high cost—hundreds of miles to upstate landfills)?

No. The plant will import MSW from surrounding areas, mainly New York City and Westchester.

How will the MSW arrive? And how will the “clean diesel” fuel and other byproducts leave the plant?

The plant will receive 4800 tons of MSW daily—the equivalent of a fully loaded Boeing 747 pulling up behind the Stony Point ShopRite every day. Up to 400 diesel mega-trucks will roll daily through Orangetown, Clarkstown, Haverstraw and Stony Point.

On June 27, New Planet gave a formal presentation on the \$700 million project to the Stony Point Town Board. New Planet President John Cruikshank said that the CSW freight rail tracks, which bisect the proposed location, could be used to haul away the produced diesel fuel without adding any tanker trucks to the roads. CSW freight already carries an array of volatile hazardous materials through the county, including mile-long “bomb trains” filled with highly combustible **Bakken crude oil** to refineries and ports in New Jersey.



Bakken crude oil train derailment in Mount Carbon, W. Va. next to the Kanawha River, Feb. 18, 2015. Photo: U.S. Coast Guard Chief Petty Officer Angie Vallier, via Wikimedia Commons

The project proposal also states that recyclables will be removed from the waste stream, sorted and transported out of Stony Point. Other unusable waste and byproducts, some of them hazardous, will be trucked to landfills.

Obviously, storage must be provided for trash awaiting processing. In the event of a breakdown, that could mean thousands of tons of backed-up garbage.

Who’s looking out for the environment and making sure that nearby residents are protected from noxious odors and harmful emissions?

In response to Earth Matters’ inquiry, the DEC issued this statement on 7/18/17:

DEC is the lead agency under the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR) for the proposed New Planet Energy Project: the construction and operation of a waste-to-fuels facility that would convert 4,800 tons per day of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) into a fuel product. The New Planet Project is located in the Town of Stony Point, Rockland County, New York.

New Planet Energy is currently preparing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) in accordance with the approved final scoping document. To date, no applications have been

submitted to DEC. The DEIS will not be accepted until DEC receives all submitted applications and those applications are deemed complete. DEC would then start the public comment period for the proposed project, which will include a public hearing.

The DEC website includes a page devoted to the [New Planet Stony Point proposal](#); it includes all relevant documents, including New Planet’s “scoping document,” detailing the construction and operation of the proposed plant.



New Planet says it will recycle all possible unusable material at its Stony Point plant. Your recycling goes here—to Rockland County's Materials Recovery Center [MRF] in Hillburn. Much of this material makes its way to China, which may soon stop accepting many types of waste and scrap—with [dire consequences](#) and thousands of job losses for the American recycling industry. Photo: Susan Hellauer

What are the proposed benefits to the Town of Stony Point for hosting this plant?

The “green” aspects of the project are touted by New Planet: fewer landfill acres needed for municipal waste, which would instead be converted to sulfur-free transportation fuel.

But the project will not reduce Stony Point’s—or Rockland County’s—MSW or accompanying disposal expenses. And the destiny of any diesel fuel produced is not clear. In terms of other rewards, New Planet points to increased tax revenues to the town, more construction and permanent jobs, and ancillary businesses that will arise in connection with the waste-to-diesel plant.

Who hopes this project will work out?

Stony Point Supervisor Jim Monaghan sees the potential benefits to his town of much-needed ratables and jobs. But Monaghan is not ignoring potential problems with traffic, odors and pollution.

“As supervisor, I’m not walking into this with my eyes closed,” Monaghan said. “We do need industry here.”

Losses like the Lovett power plant, Kennedy Trucking, and the U.S. Gypsum Plant have cost his town millions in revenue and have sent property taxes soaring. He added: “But we only want this if the DEC says that this is clean energy, and if it meets all emissions standards. . . We are concerned about truck traffic, but there will be a massive traffic study of the whole region.”

Monaghan wants New Planet to underwrite the hiring of an environmental engineer of his town's choice to protect Stony Point's people and environment. "I have concerns. I'm not saying 'Come on in, we'll give you anything,'" said Monaghan. "We want to see that it passes the emissions standards and we want to see the traffic study. We want to make sure it's right for Stony Point."

Who does not love this project?

Haverstraw Town Supervisor Howard Phillips is unhappy about the destructive, high-volume truck traffic traversing his town. But he also is worried about an unproven waste-to-gas technology and about the project's proposed location near the Haverstraw borderline. "Something like this should be in an isolated area. It shouldn't be up against residential homes. And it shouldn't be next to elementary schools and senior citizen complexes," said Phillips.



In Minisceongo Creek, young volunteers led by the Rockland County Division of Environmental Resources' Nicole Laible [foreground, pointing] count juvenile eels for the NYS DEC.

Phillips also expressed concern about nearby waterways. "[The proposed site] is adjacent to the Minisceongo Creek's opening to the Hudson River," he said, noting that his town had recently built a canoe and kayak launch there. "We donated almost 60 acres of land to the state of New York—all wetlands—so that it would remain forever as a natural habitat. Why this site? This is not a place to put this kind of facility."

After carefully examining New Planet's proposal, the Orangetown Town Board at its July 18 meeting adopted a [Memorializing Resolution](#), in which the Board "unanimously expresses its fervent opposition to the proposal of the 'New Planet Waste to Fuel Facility'" in Stony Point. The resolution cites numerous environmental and safety hazards, along with unproven technology.

Who's on the fence?

"[The Town of Clarkstown] is monitoring this very closely, obviously concerned for the potential of enhanced truck traffic through the town," Supervisor George Hoehmann told Earth Matters.

Hoehmann is seeking more information about how truck traffic will be mitigated, to avoid any adverse impact on the residents of Clarkstown.



18-wheel trucks dump 6,000 tons a day of garbage at Seneca Meadows Landfill in Seneca Falls, New York.

The New Planet proposal is also a recurring agenda item for local environmental groups, like the [Rockland Sierra Club](#) and [350 NJ](#), which have been debating the downsides as well as potential benefits. We asked Gale Pisha, Secretary of the Sierra Club Lower Hudson Group, to share some environmental activist perspective. She admitted that these issues are tricky:

This does reuse garbage from New York City which would otherwise end up in landfills. But it does create a market for the garbage, so there's not as strong an incentive to move to Zero Waste.

There will be a lot of garbage trucks driving up to Stony Point, but otherwise the trucks might be hauling that garbage upstate, so bringing it only as far as Rockland might actually be saving diesel fuel used by the trucks.

The organic material, which will be extracted to make the diesel (or possibly jet) fuel, will end up being burned and that carbon will go into the atmosphere instead of being in a landfill from which the carbon will not get into the atmosphere. But this fuel might replace new petroleum, which would be drilled from the earth. So while it's not renewable, it might prevent as much drilling of new fossil fuels.

And there's a major question of building new infrastructure to support bridge technologies to renewable energy, which then may persist for another 50 years because they've been built. This same argument goes for natural gas pipelines.

What are next steps in the approval process?

New Planet representatives will address the Stony Point Planning Board meeting on July 27 with recent updates to their plans. The meeting is open to the public, but is not a forum for questions or comments. Supervisor Monaghan said that public hearings will be held at a later date with input from all stakeholders.

The DEC will await more applications from New Planet before acting on the numerous permits this project will require. It will also open a public comment period, and hold public meetings.



Trash hauler approaches upstate landfill: Photo: [Concerned Citizens of Seneca County](#)

Learn more:

- How will falling oil prices affect biofuel refineries? “[Are We There Yet? A Biofuel Refinery Update](#)” *Renewable Energy World* (12/21/15)
- [Waste to Energy Gasification](#). Gasification and Syngas Technologies Council
- [New Planet Project](#). NY State Dept. of Environmental Conservation
- “[Facts Rule Out Gasification](#)” fact sheet from environmental activist group [Gaia](#) details repeated and costly failed attempts to gasify MSW
- Orangetown’s Town Board [minutes of 7/18](#), with Resolution in opposition to the New Planet proposal
- “[Not a drop of biofuel has been produced](#)” by the New Planet Energy/INEOS waste-to-fuel plant in Vero Beach. *Vero Beach 32963* (4/20/16)
- “[Los Angeles’ Innovative Trash-to-Fuel Project Falls Apart](#),” *Los Angeles Daily News*(3/18/12)