

All you wanted to know about RUCO

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‘Recycle and re-use’ is the mantra for eco-friendly living. There’s a new way to apply this to your eating habits as well. The government has launched a new project to convert used cooking oil into something more useful. The country’s apex food regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in association with the Biodiesel Association of India (BDAI) has recently flagged off the ‘RUCO’ project, short for repurpose used cooking oil.

What is it?

RUCO is a project that plans to convert vegetable oils, animal fats or restaurant grease that has already been used in cooking into biodiesel for running diesel vehicles, or indeed any equipment that uses diesel.

Recycling is increasingly being carried out to produce vegetable oil-based fuel in countries such as the UK and the US. India, too, is keen to join this club. The FSSAI has released a detailed guidance note on the handling and disposal of used cooking oil (UCO) by small and big food business operators and household-level users. RUCO enables the collection of inedible cooking oil by authorised agencies from institutional and individual users, which is then transferred to a plant to make bio-diesel. This fuel is then proposed to be blended with vehicle fuel produced by oil marketing companies for distribution at the pump.

The FSSAI’s new guidelines require large food business operators to store UCO separately, which they can then sell to authorised UCO aggregators or collection agencies registered with the BDAI, State biodiesel boards and other agencies nominated by State government. As of November 2019, there are 11 authorised aggregators in the country. The FSSAI also

requires all food business operators to refrain from buying UCO and to monitor the quality of oil that they use for cooking. It has notified the limit of total polar compounds (TPC) used in cooking at 25 per cent. TPC is used to measure the quality of oil, and its level increases every time oil is re-heated. TPC beyond 25 per cent is considered unfit for human consumption.

Why is it important?

Apart from reducing India's oil import bill by a tiny bit, the government hopes to address two other issues through RUCO. One, preventing adulteration of new cooking oil with UCO in the market; and two, reducing repeated usage of the same UCO by food joints keen to cut corners.

Given that expensive vegetable oils make up a big chunk of the Indian household's budget, it is common practice to reheat cooking oil or re-use oil that has already been used for frying. All fried finger foods that are an absolute delight to eat often reuse cooking oil. But this poses serious health hazards. Reuse changes the physical and nutritional properties of the oil, leading to a variety of health-related problems from hypertension and an upset stomach to liver diseases.

Why should I care?

Food businesses involved in manufacturing food products often dispose used cooking oil for industrial consumption like soap-, cosmetic- or pet food-making. UCO also finds its way to small food vendors and households at cheap prices as well. It is hazardous not only for health hazard but also for the environment. UCO when discarded without any treatment clogs drainage systems as well.

As a user, one can identify if the oil used is inedible when blue-grey smoke is emitted, a tough foam is formed or the oil becomes dark and murky. Individuals can also take their UCO to the collecting centres and earn money. All the UCO collecting agencies are expected to pay food business operators immediately at the time of collection of UCO, based on the quantity and quality. The RUCO label on a food business provider would indicate that it

conforms to the RUCO ecosystem and does not reuse the cooking oil. McDonalds' has been one of the large food firms to flag off RUCO in Pune and Mumbai.

The bottomline

If your love for fries and bread *pakodas* can contribute to cleaner living, why not?