

Fodder for fuel: Brisbane Airport seeks alternative

By Marissa Calligeros
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Brisbane Airport is set to take part in a landmark biofuel trial.

Photo: Peter O'Donnell

Brisbane Airport could be the first in Australia where planes can fill up with biofuel made from weeds or sugarcane.

Virgin Australia, Brisbane Airport Corporation and sustainable fuel company SkyNRG have commissioned a feasibility study that will look at using locally grown woody weeds and sugarcane to produce biofuel.

The study, expected to take 12 months to complete, will also look at sustainable and cost-effective ways of transporting the necessary plant material and the best way to convert it into biofuel.

Virgin Australia chief operating officer Sean Donohue said the airline intends to have renewable fuel account for 5 per cent of its fuel consumption by 2020.

"Southeast Queensland is an ideal base for this project because it is one of our largest hubs and hosts many potential sustainably harvested feedstocks for biofuel, including woody weeds, crop residues and bagasse," he said.

Bagasse is the fibrous matter that remains after sugarcane or sorghum stalks are crushed to extract their juice.

US company Solena currently produces jet fuel from algae and industrial waste and claims emissions from the fuels are at least 90 per cent lower than the emissions from regular jet fuel.

Demand for jet fuel in Australia is said to be increasing 5 per cent a year, while the carbon footprint of the aviation industry increases by 3 per cent a year.

Growth in demand for aviation services continues to outstrip the rate of fuel-efficiency improvements, so the industry's net carbon footprint continues to grow.

But biofuel remains controversial because of its reliance on agricultural production.

SkyNRG managing director Dirk Kronemeijer said Australia was potentially one of the best places in the world for developing sustainable jet fuels.

"We will do whatever it takes to turn this into a success by developing a local supply chain for sustainable jet fuel that is one day scalable and affordable," he said.

