

Total starts biofuel plant in France to take on Eni and Neste



Total SA started production at a new biofuel plant in southern France, taking on rivals such as Neste Oyj and Eni SpA for a share of Europe's biodiesel market. The refinery, in La Mede near Marseille, will process vegetable oil, animal fat and used cooking oil to produce as much as 500,000 tonnes a year of so-called hydrotreated vegetable oil, or HVO, which is blended by distributors with diesel to meet government biofuel requirements.

However, the project has been criticised as it will use palm oil for almost half its main feed-stock at the start. "Our biorefinery will allow us to make biofuels in France that were previously imported," Bernard Pinatel, Total's head of refining and chemicals, said on Wednesday in a statement in

which he championed the role of biofuels in cutting carbon emissions. In a September report, Total said it wanted to take more than 10% of the European market for HVO production. It has spent €275mn (\$310mn) since 2015 transforming the unprofitable La Mede oil refinery into a biofuel plant, a conversion similar to one carried out by Italy's Eni in Venice. Finnish companies including Neste operate the most HVO capacity in Europe. Total's refinery has been controversial for its planned use of palm oil, whose production in countries such as Indonesia is slammed by environmental groups for causing deforestation.

Use of the oil also denies Total French tax breaks that apply to other renewable fuels, meaning the facility can't compete with European peers, Chief Executive Officer Patrick Pouyane has warned. The oil major has lobbied the government for a change of stance on the tax break, arguing that it's working with palm-oil producers that are certified under a European Union system that tracks sustainable practices and respect for human rights. Total's plant will use as much as 300,000 tonnes of palm oil a year, and at least 50,000 tonnes of French-grown rapeseed. An analysis by the Palm Oil Transparency Coalition shows European palm-oil importers are unlikely to be able to ensure that the products they sell are "deforestation-free" by a self-imposed goal of 2020. Only about a third of the palm oil imported into Europe by the survey respondents could be traced to the plantation it came from, according to the report.