

Half-eaten hamburgers on research menu

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On the research menu: half-eaten hamburgers

University of Florida students Shunpei Iguchi and James Duncan spent 10 hours sifting through garbage while separating the wrappers from half-eaten hamburgers at the Reitz Union food court Thursday.

Iguchi and Duncan are interns in UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences bio-energy program conducting a study on food waste as a possible source of renewable energy.

Some organic waste could potentially be recycled into a usable fuel source, according to Ann C. Wilkie, director of the bio-energy school.

"One of the projects for this year's interns is to get an idea of how much organic waste is actually produced on campus," she said.

Wilkie said summer interns look at the alternative possibilities of waste management and how waste can be recycled into useful energy.

In order to extract the byproducts from garbage, Iguchi and Duncan put the food scraps in an anaerobic digesting system, where microbes break down the organic matter converting it into a form of natural gas called "biogas."

"We're putting on gloves and going through the garbage to make sure everything can go in the digest system," Duncan said.

Duncan and Iguchi marked cardboard boxes "organic" and "inorganic" in hopes that lunching students would categorize their garbage.

The two are still working out the kinks of the experiment, and Thursday's dry run proved slightly more challenging than they previously thought.

"The biggest problem is that people are lazy," Iguchi said.

As the day went on he and Duncan had to change the signs on the bins to direct students having trouble separating "food" and "non-food" items.

The last signs put on the bins included pictures of "food" and "non-food" items, including a cartoon of fries and milk shakes, to better guide students.

"We saw a range of reactions, most commonly confusion," Duncan said. "But separating food scraps from packaging is a common practice in most parts of the globe."

As part of the project, Duncan will write a proposal on how the experiment can be made better.

"Right now, nobody has committed to the project," Duncan said.
