

Auto Industry Takes Second Look at Natural Gas to Power Passenger Vehicles

By ALAN SAYRE
AP Business Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) – The United States has record supplies of natural gas and plenty of reasons to promote natural-gas powered cars, but consumers, manufacturers and fuel suppliers haven't shown much interest.

Now, a major natural gas developer's plans to vastly increase the number of truck stops that offer liquid natural gas could help boost its use in the vehicles that burn the most fuel, while promoting its availability to a wider market.

Lots of natural gas is available, if U.S. drivers decide to use it. In just a few years, domestic natural gas supplies have increased by trillions of cubic feet through shale finds, boosting the supply to the point where plans are in place to export part of the overflow.

The growth of natural gas vehicles in the United States so far has been dominated by fleets of buses, taxis, and garbage haulers. Only one natural gas car is commercially produced in the country: the Honda Civic GX, recently renamed the NG. It has sold a grand total of about 13,000 in 13 years of production.

The reasons for the lackluster sales of natural gas cars are many: the fuel is only available at a handful of public stations, tethering the vehicles within a certain distance of a fuel source. And even though the pump price of natural gas can run \$1 to \$2 less per gallon equivalent than gasoline, natural gas vehicles carry a higher sticker price.

The focus for the natural gas vehicle industry in the United States has been the fuel-guzzlers: commercial vehi-

cles, especially tractor-trailer rigs.

Rich Kolodziej, president of the trade association NGV America, says that makes sense in terms of overall fuel usage. He said a driver who puts 12,000 miles a year on a car at 25 miles to the gallon will use about 500 gallons of gasoline annually. But a diesel-driven 18-wheeler can easily go 120,000 miles a year. At six miles per gallon, that comes to 20,000 gallons.

"If you're trying to reduce foreign imports of oil, you're trying to reduce greenhouse gases and emissions in urban areas, where do you put your effort? You put it on the big vehicles," Kolodziej said.

For reasons of tank space, liquid natural gas is used by commercial trucks, while compressed natural gas is the fuel of choice for cars.

According to the international trade association NGV Global, there are 12.7 million natural gas vehicles in the world, including 6.8 million in the Asia-Pacific rim, 4.2 million in Latin America, 1.4 million in Europe, and 122,000 in Africa.

The U.S. has just 112,000 of them – less than 1 percent of the global total, and less than a tenth of 1 percent of the 253.7 million vehicles in the U.S.

Most of them are in fleets. "The big reason that they work well for fleets and not the average person on the street is that most fleet vehicles are used for relatively short trips," said John O'Dell, the current senior editor of Edmunds.com, which follows the vehicle industry. "They go back to the barn in the evening where they have a refueling station that can handle them.

"There is not a really good fueling system in this country," O'Dell added. "You have to have the infrastructure out there to convince people to buy natural gas cars."

Kolodziej said that there are about 180,000 gasoline stations – and only about 1,000 locations to fill up with natural gas.

But that may be changing.

The T. Boone Pickens-backed Clean Energy Fuels Corp. is embarking on a major expansion of natural gas fueling and plans to add liquefied natural gas pumps at 150 truck stops nationwide over

the next 24 to 36 months.

"We've mapped out a strategy to cover every major interstate in the domestic United States," said Clean Energy Fuels chief marketing officer James Harger.

Clean Energy currently provides fueling services for over 500 fleets consisting of about 22,000 vehicles, such as transit buses, taxis, shuttle buses, school buses, municipal cars and garbage trucks, Harger said.

Still, Clean Energy has its eyes firmly focused on the long-haul trucking industry with its truck stop expansion

plan.

Harger and other natural gas proponents are putting stock in pending congressional legislation that would provide tax credits to cover 80 percent of the cost difference between a liquid natural gas tractor-trailer and the diesel variety. Harger said the five-year bill probably would cost about \$1 billion a year. The U.S. spends over \$1 billion a day on foreign oil.

"This will help jump-start this industry," he said.

C.R. England, a major refrigerated carrier, recently started using five liquid natural

gas-fired tractors for its rigs in southern California. The company has about 4,000 diesel tractors, said Tracy Brown, a company operating director. He said the region was chosen because of the ready availability of dedicated Clean Energy refueling depots. The rigs are being used in the Los Angeles region and on a route to and from Las Vegas, Brown said.

Although he would not reveal what Salt Lake City-based C.R. England paid for the liquid natural gas tractors, he said fuel cost savings could lead to overall savings within a year or two.

Sonic Developed to Protect in Crashes; NHTSA Agrees

DETROIT – The 2012 Chevrolet Sonic has received a 5-star overall vehicle score for safety from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The vehicle was tested under NHTSA's revised New Car Assessment Program, which started with the 2011 model year.

The Sonic brings to 10 the number of General Motors 2012 models with 5-star overall vehicle scores for safety.

The overall rating is based on frontal and side crash tests in addition to rollover resistance testing. The three test conditions are combined mathematically into an "Overall Vehicle Score."

The Sonic achieved an overall vehicle score of 5 stars – the highest rating possible – even though Sonic received four stars for rollover. NHTSA applies the results for the Sonic sedan to the 5-door hatchback model because of the same safety equipment and performance.

"We developed Sonic to ex-

ceed customer expectations of subcompacts in terms of segment-leading safety features," said Gay Kent, GM executive director of vehicle safety.

"From the largest vehicles in our lineup to the smallest, we are putting overall crashworthiness and state-of-the-art safety technologies at the top of the list of must-haves."

GM says the Sonic is designed to help drivers avoid crashes, while protecting occupants in a crash. The car incorporates a single welded side ring unit and more than 60 percent of the vehicle safety cage consisting of high-strength steel. Other standard safety features include:

- Driver and front passenger dual-stage frontal air bags, seat-mounted side pelvic/thorax air bags, knee air bags and head-curtain side air bags with rollover protection that cover front and outboard rear seating rows.
- The Sonic also has side impact air bags in the outboard rear seating positions for a total of 10 standard air bags.
- Rollover sensors, which can activate the head-curtain side air bags if sensors determine an imminent rollover.
- In a rollover, the air bags stay inflated longer to provide more occupant protection.
- StabiliTrak electronic stability control helps the driver maintain control by comparing the path being steered by



The 2012 Chevrolet Sonic received a 5-Star overall occupant safety rating in the New Car Assessment Program conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

the driver with the actual response and, when necessary, applying the brakes or adjusting the throttle or a combination of both.

• Power-assisted front disc and rear drum brakes with ABS, full-function traction control and panic brake assist that activates when an emergency braking maneuver is detected. The system automatically develops additional brake pressure to more quickly engage ABS.

• Front safety belt pretensioners to reduce forward occupant movement and load-limiting retractors to help manage forces during a collision.

• OnStar, which features the Automatic Crash Response System that uses GPS and cellular phone technology to automatically call for help in the event that a crash is detected.

Starting with 2011 models, NHTSA introduced tougher tests and more rigorous requirements for its 5-star ratings that provide more information about safety feature performance and crash-avoidance technologies.

Changes included a new side pole test simulating a 20-mph side-impact crash into a 10-inch-diameter pole or tree at a 75-degree angle just behind the A-pillar on the driver's side.

Added Security Aimed at Preventing Growing Numbers of Escalade Thefts

DETROIT – Just underneath the surface of the 2012 Cadillac Escalade are new security enhancements developed to combat thieves who have pushed and towed the segment-leading luxury SUV to the top of annual most-stolen vehicle lists.

The Escalade is already well-protected against typical drive-away grand theft auto through existing security features and standard OnStar security technology.

"The goal is to make the Escalade a very difficult target for thieves without any added inconvenience for customers," said Bill Biondo, General Motors' global leader for vehicle theft prevention. "The new systems work in the background and few people realize they are there, but they are strong added protections."

The 2012 security enhancements:

cated encryption system for the key, key cylinder and ignition system (Deters: Drive-away thefts)

• A more robust steering column-lock system that makes it nearly impossible to maneuver the Escalade onto a flatbed. (Deters: "push-away" thefts)

• An available inclination sensor that sets off an alarm when the system senses an unwarranted change of the angle of the vehicle, such as would occur with towing, flatbedding or lifting the vehicle. (Deters: towing, push-away, and wheel thefts)

• An available shock sensor intended to reduce content theft and push-away theft by sounding the alarm when the vehicle is "shocked," such as by breaking window glass. (Deters: Property theft)

• An available new wheel lock system to help prevent the theft of Escalade's wheels

and tires.

OnStar provides standard additional security with a remote ignition lock that can prevent the vehicle from starting if a break-in is detected.

If a vehicle is stolen, OnStar can also provide vehicle location and remotely slow the vehicle down to assist law enforcement in recovering the vehicle.

"Combined, these technologies comprise one of the most extensive sets of theft-deterrent measures available for this type of vehicle and meet or exceed security specifications among global vehicle security analysts," Biondo said.

The new inclination sensors will make it more difficult to push or tow an Escalade undetected.

Undetected thefts and break-ins will also be more difficult with the added shock sensors and locking devices. to reduce vehicle thefts.

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