

Propane Hits the Accelerator

Sales of Blue Bird school bus, Roush truck gain speed.

Within days of taking its first order in October for the new Roush/Ford F-150 pickup truck, Roush (Lavonia, Mich.) reported it had 75 sales. Calls from California, where California Air Resources Board (CARB) certification is pending, indicates interest is strong for another 300 to 400 trucks.

Orders for 30 vehicles were placed in DeKalb County, Ga., reported Roush spokesman Greg Zilberfarb, while the remaining 45 orders were primarily in Texas. Sales currently are being targeted at medium- and high-volume fleets through select Ford dealers. Vehicle delivery was expected this month on orders submitted in October outside California.

Meanwhile, in late October an order for 20 Class C propane Vision school buses manufactured by Blue Bird Corp. (Fort Valley, Ga.) was placed by A-Z Bus Sales of Colton, Calif., according to A-Z's Jim Reynolds. The model specified in the order typically accommodates 24 pupil passengers plus a wheel-

chair, although it is available in various configurations. Vision school buses are available in passenger sizes ranging up to 78 occupants.

The buses were ordered by the Moreno Valley Unified School District in Moreno Valley, Calif., Reynolds said, which has an enrollment of about 37,000 students. This follows on the heels of the sale of 16 Vision buses in September (*BPN*, September, p. 22) to San Antonio's Northside Independent School District by Capital Bus Sales and Service of Texas Inc. (Leander, Texas). All of those buses were 71-passenger units.

Promotion of the Blue Bird propane bus and light-duty Ford pickup is at full throttle. Capital Bus Sales president Don Paull brought a Vision demonstration bus to the 33rd National Association for Pupil Transportation Convention & Trade Show in Grand Rapids, Mich. in late October. The annual event is attended by school transportation fleet and safety professionals from across the nation.

As part of National Bus Safety Week

Oct. 22-26, the Railroad Commission of Texas (RRC) invited school districts, state government administrators, and others to an unveiling of a 72-passenger Blue Bird Vision school bus in Austin. The event, hosted by RRC chairman Michael L. Williams, included a test drive of the bus and an address by Williams that focused on propane's health and safety advantages and economic benefits.

Williams also outlined current federal and state alternative fuel and purchase incentives that make a compelling business case for buying propane school buses. "Start with the federal 50-cents-a-gallon rebate on propane motor fuel, which brings in about \$1500 per year per school bus," he said. Texas is one of several states that offer grants to help fund the purchase of new cleaner buses and equipment that curb emissions.

The RRC-sponsored bus event in Austin marked the culmination of a month-long Texas tour of the Vision bus, the Roush-upfitted Ford F-150, and other propane vehicles equipped with CleanFUEL USA's LPI (liquid propane injection) fuel system. Capital Bus Sales' Paull noted that school administrators expressed a great deal of interest in the bus and pointed out that Texas school districts have long operated propane-powered buses. Dallas County Schools alone operates about 500 such buses in its fleet. "I would describe the efforts to promote the bus as a slow-rolling snowball," Paull noted. "We're building awareness and momentum all the time."

On the West Coast, A-Z Bus Sales was hosting its own road show, including displaying and demonstrating the bus at the Southern California Clean Vehicle Technology Expo in Ontario, Calif. in mid-October. That appearance was followed by a ride-and-drive hosted by Delta Liquid Energy (Paso Robles, Calif.) in Lancaster, Calif. in late October. Representatives of the local Clean Cities Coalition, the Antelope Valley Air Quality Management District, propane industry representatives, and local dignitaries were in attendance. Other propane-fueled vehicles featured at the



Propane was well represented by Industry members at the Southern California Clean Vehicle Technology Expo in Ontario, Calif. Gathered around the Roush-upfitted Ford F-150 propane pickup are, from left, Eric W. Bates of Ferrellgas, Jon Van Bogart of CleanFUEL USA, Roush spokesman Greg Zilberfarb who represented PERC at the event, Ted Olsen of Delta Liquid Energy, and Al McFadden of CleanFUEL USA.

event included the Roush F-150 pickup, a heavy-duty GM service/delivery truck, and a medium-duty truck.

As of press time, the bus had been on the road for several weeks, making stops at Southern California school district headquarters and air quality management district offices, noted Reynolds. The road show will head to Northern California in January.

Roush F-150 LPI pickup demo trucks have also been out and about on their own. Following a mid-October appearance at the Clean Vehicle Expo in Ontario, one of the trucks was on display at the AliCar Expo in Santa Monica, Calif., while another was featured at the Green Industry & Equipment Expo, a showcase for outdoor power equipment and related products, in Louisville, Ky.

Brian Feehan, PERC's managing director for engine fuel programs, observed that the school bus and light-duty pickup truck initiatives appear to be headed in the right direction; just 18 months after the industry funded the projects, orders are now being taken for the vehicles.



Since the Roush/Ford F-150 made its debut, said Feehan, industry members and Roush have been interested in expanding the propane truck program to include Ford's F-250 and F-350 platforms. However, he stressed that it is important to keep the focus on the F-150 to ensure its success before volume

is added. "At the same time we want to be in a position to move quickly if there are opportunities, and we've started some market research. That research has to show the vehicle will have a long shelf life and long-term viability."

"The whole on-road segment is so exciting, because three or four years ago we didn't even have a product that we could sell," said Tucker Perkins of Inergy Propane (Ashland, Va.), chairman of PERC's Engine Fuel Advisory Committee, in the fall edition of PERC's *In Touch* newsletter. "Today we have vehicles that when you drive them, you don't notice anything different yet it's burning propane. It's better for the environment and fleet economies."

—John Needham

Looking for the F-150?

Ford F-150 purchase inquiries are being directed to Roush's Tom Arnold, who can be contacted at (313) 806-4299, (734) 779-7234 (cell), or tearno@roushind.com. In Atlanta, potential buyers may contact Roger Moore at Allan Vigil Ford at (770) 527-9041 or rogermoore@vigilfordfleet.com.