

Powered by Propane— And ‘Greener’ Than Ever



Propane is no Johnny-come-lately to the clean, “green,” environmental world. One of the first uses of the fuel in the early 1900s was in vehicle and industrial engines, and propane marketers have been powering their vehicles with the clean fuel for decades.

With the U.S. president calling for a 20% reduction in gasoline consumption within 10 years and the production of alternative fuels to be expanded to 35 billion gallons, Eastern Propane Gas Inc. (Rochester, N.H.) was helping meet the challenge last fall by converting eight of its new service trucks and an additional pickup truck to run on clean-burning propane. Eastern, which marked its 75th

anniversary this year, has a long history of fueling its fleet with the country's most widely used and readily available alternative fuel.

Before the conversion of the service trucks, it already had more than 30 vehicles running on propane. Eastern's Felicia LaBranche noted that if the company's most recent conversion program goes as well as anticipated, it will look to convert more of its vehicles shortly.

The newly-converted light-duty trucks—eight GMC 3500HD service vehicles and one GMC Canyon sales vehicle—are equipped with Prins Alternative Fuel Systems conversion kits supplied by Jasper Engine (Jasper, Ind.). Eastern is using Prins' VSI-LPG (vapor sequential injection) kit. VSI, a fully-integrated master/slave management system, is said to provide LPG performance comparable to gasoline.

The system includes the Keihin OEM injector, developed in cooperation with Prins by Keihin Corp. of Japan, one of the world's leading injector manufacturers. Diagnostics, service, and parameter load software operate from Windows applications. The gasoline-propane bi-fuel system starts on gas, and within seconds switches to run on propane. Eastern Propane technicians are performing the conversions.

The eight-cylinder service vehicles have 60-gal. tanks (50-gal. propane capacity) by Manchester Tank & Equipment (Franklin, Tenn.). The company's conversion program also



Eastern Propane Gas Inc.'s GMC 3500HD service vehicles are equipped with Prins Alternative Fuel Systems conversion kits supplied by Jasper Engine and 60-gal. fuel tanks by Manchester Tank & Equipment. Eastern's veteran mechanics, experts in propane carburetion, performed the conversions.

includes beta testing a five-cylinder GMC Canyon pickup with a Prins kit.

"Most of our mechanics are very familiar with propane carburetion, as we've tested and tried various other propane carburetion systems," said

propane the same way that gasoline is injected," he explained.

To highlight the wide availability and environmental benefits of propane, Eastern was at the first New England Going Green Energy & Living

Exposition in Manchester, N.H. in late October. Eastern Propane representatives were on hand at the expo to emphasize the environmental benefits of the "green" fuel. Citing Environmental Protection



Mike Gagne, fleet manager. Those who are less familiar receive hands-on training under the guidance of Gagne and his veteran mechanics. Gagne's experience with other systems in the past had yielded mixed results, often not as good as Prins VSI. "That's likely because the Prins system injects

Agency and U.S. Forest Service statistics, company-produced materials pointed out that running the eight service trucks on propane for one year will reduce CO₂ emissions by about 56 tons, the equivalent of planting 21 acres of trees.

The company's materials were well

Where Does Propane Stand in the Climate Change Debate?

Mention climate change and the earth warming and, depending on who's in the crowd, the subject provokes not only a lot of passionate rhetoric but also an equal amount of snickering and skepticism. The debate on the subject and what actions should or shouldn't be taken continues to build at both the local and national level.

The National Propane Gas Association (NPGA) has put together a draft white paper on the subject and how propane and the industry fit in the debate. According to Rick Rolden, NPGA's president and CEO, the topic has the potential to be one of the most

far-reaching issues, affecting every citizen and business and their use of fossil fuels. For much of 2007, Rolden has been working with NPGA leadership to ensure that the propane industry is not only protected from the issue's downsides but also to position the fuel and industry in a positive light within the debate. The association has been soliciting input from its board members to help clearly define what they think are NPGA's interests and objectives and to provide staff with clear guidance on how to manage the issue.

The final draft of the white paper, "Positioning NPGA on Federal Climate

Change Legislation," was on the agenda of NPGA's board meeting last month. The paper is expected to cover several points, including regulation, the need for balanced R&D of resources, economic factors, domestic exploration and production of fuels, promoting renewable fuels at the expense of clean alternative fuels, and the transportation sector.

Also part of the events at the board meeting was a special viewing for members of the documentary, "The Great Global Warming Swindle." A copy of the final white paper will be posted on NPGA's website, www.npga.org.

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Bobtail drivers have been known to bring a box of dog biscuits with them to win over—or at least distract—dogs when they're making deliveries, but Eastern Propane is taking the practice to a new level. Its drivers are leaving thank you notes with two Nature's Animals all-natural dog bones in delivery ticket bags.

Expressing gratitude to customers for

their loyalty has become an important part of the marketer's customer experience management initiatives, and after 75 years Eastern Propane management has learned a thing or two about keeping its customers warm and satisfied with the company's services. Felicia LaBranche, Eastern Propane's marketing associate, said this initiative has generated positive feedback, even from cat owners, since

drivers began leaving the treats in the fall of 2007. "Our customers love this gesture," she told *BPN*, "and our delivery representatives appreciate having another tool to connect with their customers in the field, and, on occasion, befriend the protective canine."

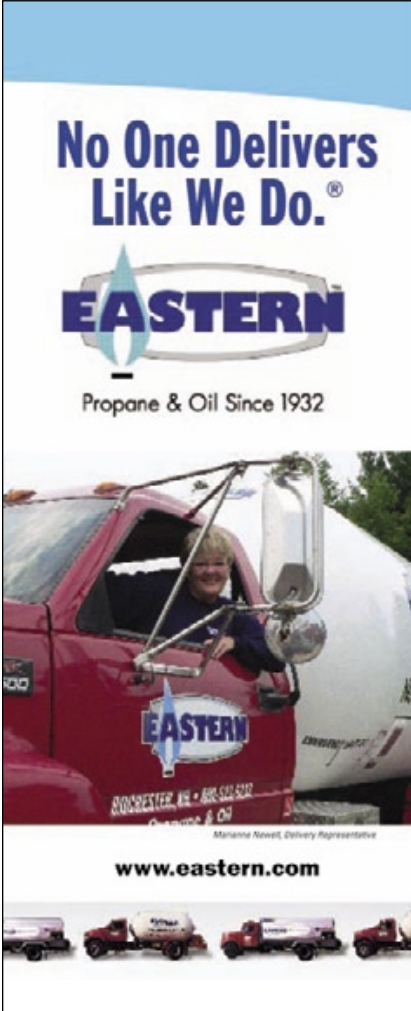
The attached thank you note includes a photo of Winni, a Labrador, who "owns" one of Eastern Propane's employees. The card and treats have generated thank you notes from customers—both two- and four-legged.

In addition to the thank you note, the marketer also recently produced a brochure for customers summarizing the different services it offers—from propane and fueloil service to residential and commercial heating systems, pool and spa heating, as well as online account management and incentive plans (shown below). The front of the brochure also features a female bobtail driver, Marianne Newell—not the stereotypical image of most truck drivers. She is one of 100 certified propane/fueloil drivers working for Eastern.

received and the booth was busy with people asking questions.

Eastern Propane has 20 propane-fueled, medium-duty bobtails and crane/rack trucks in its fleet, noted Breanne Boudreau, fleet administrator. All the medium-duty trucks are older-model GM 7500 Topkicks equipped with a "mixed bag" of dedicated vapor-injection conversion systems. "Those trucks purchased previous to 1998 were converted aftermarket with IMPCO kits," Gagne said, "and the conversions were done by Eastern." Medium-duty conversion work after 1998 was performed for GM by an independent upfitter. Eastern's fleet also now includes 15 bi-fuel light-duty pickups, which were all converted by a team of nine in-house mechanics with more than 90 years of combined experience.

"For about 40 years, up until the year 2000, many, if not all of Eastern's fleet ran on propane, from bobtails down to [Chevrolet] Caprice Classics," added Gagne. "However, maintenance and reliability issues, as well as poor miles per gallon, drove most of those vehicles out, and it wasn't until recently that we were able to find a system that appears to work well."



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Marianne Newell, Delivery Representative

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To fuel its expanding propane fleet, Eastern Propane operates six refueling stations near its branch locations.

The family-owned company, which in addition to its retail propane operations is a supplier of fueloil and kerosene and construction and temporary heat services, operates in a four-state territory that includes Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Eastern Propane has nearly 300 employees and serves 85,000 customers from Maine to Cape Cod.

The full-service firm also offers pool and spa water heating systems and residential heating appliance sales and installation. As part of its outreach at the October Going Green Expo, Eastern distributed materials showcasing the energy efficiency and environmental friendliness of propane appliances, as well as highlighting that most of the fuel is domestically produced and is not reliant on a foreign supply chain.

"Due to its clean-burning properties, propane has long been recognized as a 'green' energy," the materials noted, "and since the majority of Eastern's propane is produced domestically, it is an even more significant alternate fuel choice."

—John Needham