

Help now at hand for fuel research drive

Progress for the alternative fuel technology sector depends on infrastructure, says Colin Matthews

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Imagine a world where human waste could be used to produce a clean and natural fuel. Imagine if human and animal sewage could be converted into natural gas to power our burgeoning transport system. Imagine a refuse truck arriving at the landfill site, dumping its load, and then filling up with natural gas produced on site before going back out for collections.

While this might seem a dream, it is more realistic than you might think and currently only requires a pipe and a bit of enthusiasm. Welcome to the world of biogas.

Capturing all our waste potential could release enough biogas to fuel half of the trucks and buses in Britain. The benefits would be vehicles that effectively emit no particulates, the smog-forming particles thought to cause respiratory problems, especially in the young and elderly; an 80 per cent reduction in lung-irritating oxides of nitrogen and most importantly over 95 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. What else is available today that can deliver such a result?

What's more, vehicles that run on biogas are half as noisy as their diesel brothers, opening up further logistic efficiencies for night-time deliveries. This would in turn alleviate congestion on our roads during the day, which would pay dividends for British industry.

The Confederation of British Industry has estimated that the cost of congestion to the UK economy is in the region of £20bn a year. Mercedes Benz and Iveco are at the forefront of producing natural gas trucks, with more continental manufacturers looking seriously at it. Buses from Mercedes Benz, MAN and Scania are readily available. Japan has a range of right-hand drive vehicles with proven technology.

Sweden has led the way so far; it captures and uses biogas in most of its bus fleets and refuse trucks to great effect. This gives the water companies an additional revenue stream and beef farmers have a better environmental solution to their waste issue. Research from Sweden suggests that a market in alternative fuels can be self-sustaining once 5 per cent of vehicles use it.

Given that in the UK freight vehicles account for nine per cent of the vehicle fleet but emit a quarter of all road transport CO₂ emissions, there is a huge win for society if we encourage the development of biogas.

The Energy Saving Trust is supporting this development with its refuelling and recharging infrastructure programme which offers grant funding for the development of biogas refuelling stations (along with electric, hydrogen and bio ethanol). With a pool of nearly £700,000 this is a great opportunity for businesses and local

authorities to take advantage of the funding provided by the Department for Transport.

To add to this economic opportunity, the Treasury is preparing enhanced capital allowances for the construction of the waste digester plants needed to manufacture biogas. No wonder UK local authorities and industry that currently send waste to landfill are looking at the economic savings to be had on top of the social and environmental benefits.

There has never been a more cost attractive reason to switch to biogas. So will you take up the challenge and work on infrastructure solutions?

For more information on the Energy Saving Trust's refuelling and recharging infrastructure programme or how you can make the switch to biogas please visit www.est.org.uk/fleet/funding/infrastructurep

• Colin Matthews is the head of transport grant programmes for the Energy Saving Trust.