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This shows a CNG conversion kit that has been installed on a regular gasoline burning engine. Several companies throughout Southwest Kansas and the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles are converting their fleets to CNG to save fuel costs. Hutch's C Store in Liberal will soon have a CNG pump available to the public. Courtesy photos

By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

With gas prices in most of the country soaring at more than \$3 a gallon, many drivers are left paying a hefty price to fill up a car and wondering if a lower priced alternative can be found.

Though other solutions have been found such as ethanol, one fix is as close as home – literally, and soon, motorists will be able to purchase compressed natural gas at a Liberal location.

Used to heat homes, compressed natural gas, or CNG, comes off a pipeline and is found in the U.S., making it more affordable than traditional unleaded gas.

“It burns a lot cleaner,” said Kurtis Hutchinson of Hutchinson Oil Company, parent company of Hutch's C Stores. “It reduces greenhouse gas emissions.”

Hutchinson said the company started experimenting with CNG about 12 years ago at its corporate office in Elk City, Okla.

“It took a long time for people to grasp the concept of it, but once you saw Chesapeake and Boone Pickens really start pushing it in the transportation sector, it kind of took off,” he said.

Hutchinson said with Elk City in the heart of a major oil field, there is a high demand for CNG, and while Liberal has a demand, locally, it's not quite as high.

“We're looking at going into that market and really creating a market for it,” he said. “There's enough people in the Liberal community that are interested in it that we think we can build up a market.”

Hutchinson compared the experiment to the concept of the chicken and the egg.

“Which is going to come first?” he said. “Obviously, the station has to come before the people will put the vehicles on the ground. We're kind of taking that risk and put one in Liberal and hopefully see a return from it.”

Black Hills Energy, the company that supplies natural gas to heat local homes, will supply the CNG to be used to fuel vehicles as well.

"It's the same as if you're heating your home and the gas that's coming directly in your house," Hutchinson said. "We're able to pull it directly off a pipeline. We've moved the pipeline into our store. We've set up a compressor that compresses that gas and cleans it. It compresses it to 3,600 psi and puts it into your vehicle."

Hutchinson said not all cars are CNG compatible, but kits are being made for certain vehicles.

"Those kits have to be EPA approved," he said. "They make a kit for the F-150, any Silverado 1500, 2500. Dodge actually has come out with their own kit. Ford has partnered with a third-party company. They're doing a kit on the super duty truck. The Honda Civic has created a natural CNG car from the factory. Chevy has now said that in 2014, the Impala will come as a bi-fuel vehicle. There's the Tahoe that you can get a kit for. Chevy Cruise I think. There's numerous vehicles out there that can be converted, and as we progress, I think you'll start seeing more and more vehicles come from the factory with that option."

Hutchinson said it will likely take some time, but many car manufacturers are seeing the benefits of CNG.

"These car manufacturers are kind of doing what we're doing with the stations," he said. "They're going to go ahead and throw these cars out there and see if we can create a demand for it."

Hutchinson said a CNG pump is currently being installed at Hutch's location at 1580 N. Kansas in Liberal, and he added more natural gas stations need to be created in the area.

"Somebody in Liberal buys a vehicle and they travel to Garden or Dodge or the surrounding area, they need to be able to fill up not just in Liberal but these surrounding locations too," he said.

Liberal, therefore, is a starting point as Hutchinson Oil looks to build more CNG stops in the region.

“We’re looking at Garden City,” Hutchinson said. “We’re looking at Dodge City. You’ve got to have options if you’re going to go that route. A lot of these vehicles are bi-fuel vehicles which can run off natural gas and unleaded. That eases the comfort level a bit. There will need to be other locations surrounding that.”

Hutchinson said the cost of CNG compressor and installation is quite high

“For it to be worth it to us, we have to build a demand for it,” he said.

With two locations in Elk City and one in Woodward, Okla., Liberal will be Hutch’s fourth CNG location, and a fifth is being considered in Sayre, Okla. Hutchinson said Guymon, Okla., will likely have a public facility in the near future.

“We have numerous locations on the drawing board that we want to go to with this,” he said. “How soon that’ll happen, it just kind of depends on how they play out.”

As for Liberal, Hutchinson said CNG should be available here by the end of January.

“The equipment’s ready to ship,” he said. “We hope to be pumping gas in mid to late-January.”

Hutchinson added those wondering where to find CNG filling stations can now find that information through an app on their Smart Phone telling them where those are located.

“We don't really push the dedicated vehicles for everybody,” he said. “If you travel down I-40, we've got an abundance of filling stations, so dedicated in the right choice, but I think in Liberal, you need to go to a bi-fuel where you have the unleaded and CNG option in case you get into a remote location where you can't get natural gas.”

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