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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

Compressed natural gas is the newest form of fuel used in vehicles across the country.

Liberal welcomed its first pump for the new technology earlier this month at its north Hutch's C store, and with the growth in the industry comes the need for people to work on it.

This is where Seward County Community College/Area Technical School comes into the equation. A few years ago, the school began a natural gas compression program in its business and industry department, and Steve Wiens, the assistant director of the technical school, said the program recently became accredited.

Wiens, who is also the school's Title V project director, said when the program was justified to a federal program officer who oversees Title V grants, college officials said they would be adding a CNG component to the curriculum.



“After investigations of the CNG service stations that’s going to be installed, there’s nobody trained to work on those,” he said. “That adds an additional dimension for our students and makes them more valuable to their employer.”

Wiens said the tech school has been approved to have a CNG fueling station installed. School leaders are trying to determine where it would be placed. Wiens did emphasize the station is only for school and not for public use.

Larry McLemore, the tech school’s division chair of industrial technology, said SCCC/ATS’s main purpose has always been education, and with that in mind, the business and industry department, including director Norma Jean Dodge, has developed relationships in the industry.

McLemore said this allows the school to create training for technicians for the industry in the region.

“Ultimately, our goal is to be ahead of it, so that when this infrastructure continues to be built, there are technicians available to build it,” he said. “Rather than be reactive, we’re trying to be proactive and get ahead of the thing.”

Having a training program in Southwest Kansas puts SCCC/ATS in an appropriate place, according to McLemore.

“We’re in the middle of the oldest natural gas production field there is,” he said. “We are just in a really unique position geographically that allows us to be at the front of all this. The people we need to talk to all live here.”

McLemore said the infrastructure for CNG is building fast with industry people using the fuel in the vehicles in their fleets, and as the need for the gas grows, SCCC/ATS will build the technicians needed to help keep it running.

Wiens said those coming to learn at the tech school have definitely taken notice of the CNG program.

“The demand is there, and the students are there,” he said. “Some of them are opting to go into other areas, but hopefully related to natural gas.”

Dodge agreed, saying the classes fill up quickly, and industry leaders are likewise trying to get people to those trainings, proving there is a need for what the school is doing.

Those leaders are working with Dodge to train existing labor forces at SCCC/ATS.

“They need places to do that and add those additional skills to the people they already have,” McLemore said.

CNG has even made some noise at Liberal’s Gas Compressor Institute, where, in 2013, a portion of the event was dedicate to the new technology.

“We closed with CNG, and we had several people stay for that and talked to that as well,” Dodge said.

She added 2015 will bring a new name for the Gas Compressor and Measurement Institute.

“It’s now going to be the Southwest Kansas Energy Institute,” she said. “From there, we’re going to implement a lot more of these different energy trainings you’re going to see, whether it’s CNG or some stuff we’re doing with corrosion or process tech. Both of those committees are looking into how we can change those institutes.”

McLemore said for the most part CNG vehicles have the same design as traditional vehicles.

“You can take a Malibu that’s gasoline and have it switched to bio-fuel,” he said. “It’s the same motor. You just add the CNG component.”

Wiens said engines do run cleaner with the new fuel, reducing pollution from exhaust pipes. CNG likewise features a new tank for filling.

“You had to have such a thick wall steel tank for storage,” he said of vehicles produced in earlier years. “Now, they’ve gone with composites, so they’re much lighter. They’re safer in a crash.”

Wiens said seeing if CNG would surpass traditional gasoline usage would likely take a crystal ball, but he did see a time when other fuels would develop to power automobiles.

“Years ago, they had a waste by-product they couldn’t find out a use for,” he said. “It’s called gasoline. Now, it’s not so much a waste by-product. As technology advances, they need to find another use for some of the heating oil. Henceforth, the original diesel engine was designed to run off vegetable oil. They found that it would also run off heating oil.”

What makes cars go is something that is continuously changing, according to Wiens, adding to the difficulty of telling what the future holds.

“I don’t know that it’ll ever replace gasoline, but obviously, following technology, we have to continue to find a use for our waste by-products, and as that technology moves on with other components, we’ll have to find a new use for that,” he said.

McLemore said he feels CNG is not so much as a replacement for traditional fuel, but rather an additional source for motorists to power their vehicles.

“It’s a collaborative fuel source that we can utilize to help get to that place,” he said. “It’s readily available. Infrastructure’s everywhere. It’s accessible. It’s inexpensive. It’s effective and efficient.”

McLemore said technology has made CNG affordable and effective.

“We need to get to these other places, which is energy independence and environmentally conscious,” he said. “The natural gas is going to be huge until we figure out what the next thing is.”

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