HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

ALTERNATIVE FUELS

Whether you are concerned about the political climate in the Middle East, rising fuel prices or doom and gloom from environmental experts, you may want to consider alternative fuel options that offer a different scenario for the future.

Consumers are the ones holding the purse strings as choices are made at the cash register. Conservation and purchase decisions impact the bottom line on our environment and our economy.

Conservation involves behavior changes. For example, link a number of stops in a single drive, called trip chaining, to save fuel and reduce exhaust emissions that cause air pollution. Before putting the key in the ignition, consider combining errands and activities. Carpooling also involves planning and adjusting schedules but shared rides to school, work or play reduce trip miles, pollution and fuel costs.

Reducing idling is another trick to save money and the environment. Idling time in bank lines or while waiting in the pickup line at school is getting zero miles per gallon so turn it off and keep the change. It all adds up.

Walking or biking for short trips near home saves fuel and improves health. If walking and biking are not choices for you, and the planning steps to reduce fuel use don’t fit into your time frame, let the vehicle do the thinking for you. Replace a gas guzzler with a vehicle that has better fuel economy, getting more miles per gallon. While horsepower, power locks and looks are desirable features, fuel economy becomes more important as pump prices soar. When selecting my latest car, I considered safety, fuel economy and how much stuff I could haul around.

Both the US Department of Energy and the US Environmental Protection Agency have information to help you choose behavior changes or make vehicle purchase decisions http://www.fueleconomy.gov/. The Alternative Fuels Data Center also has loads of information and explains the difference between alternative fuels such as E-85 and biodiesel that have been in the news.

E-85 is a renewable resource fuel produced by fermenting sugars from products like corn, wheat or sugarcane to create a high octane alcohol. E-85 is 85% ethanol and 15% gasoline, so it reduces the need for petroleum fuels. Since the base products are plants grown in the USA, ethanol is a home grown product, reducing dependence on foreign fuels.

Ethanol has lower emissions and causes less air pollution than gasoline and the retail price is usually very close to gas. It is estimated that more than 40,000 flex fuel vehicles (FFV’s), those that can run on gasoline or an ethanol blend, have been sold in Florida. More information on ethanol and which vehicles are ethanol compatible is available at the National Ethanol Vehicle Coalition. Call 573-635-8445 or go to the web at http://e85fuel.com.

UF/IFAS is doing research to identify crops that can be processed for ethanol with minimum impact on the environment including the need for water, fertilizer and pesticides. They are also trying to identify waste products from the food, forestry and fiber industries that can yield ethanol.

Biodiesel is another home grown fuel reducing the demand for foreign oil. Biodiesel is made from vegetable oil, animal fat or fryer grease from restaurants. The resulting fuel is non-toxic and biodegradable in its pure form.

Biodiesel, like ethanol, is usually sold blended rather than as a pure product. B-20 is 20% biodiesel mixed with petroleum diesel. Even the blended form results in cleaner air emissions and reduces engine wear and tear. New diesel vehicles are capable of running on blended or pure biodiesel, but check the manufacturers label.

Caterpillar construction equipment honors its warranty when biodiesel is used. Many school districts are switching to biodiesel in buses to reduce air pollution impacts to children. Construction and farm vehicles are biodiesel compatible. Bonnie Raitt’s band arrived in town recently on a biodiesel powered bus. More information on biodiesel is available from the National Biodiesel board at www.biodiesel.org or call 1-888-246-3437.
Out west where corn and soybeans are commonplace, it is easier to find biodiesel and ethanol at fuel stations. Right now, ethanol and biodiesel are not available to the public in our area. Governments and businesses are hesitant of trying new technologies, especially when the price is higher than gasoline. But two groups are working to change that.

The Space Coast Clean Cities Coalition promotes alternative fuel vehicles and provides educational and technical assistance to businesses considering making a change. Recently, MetroPlan Orlando’s Clean Air Team formed an Alternative Fuels Task Group. The consortium is working to develop partnerships, acquire grant funds and demonstrate a demand for cleaner, alternative fuels for commercial fleets. The increased demand translates to lower prices at the pump while also providing opportunities for alternative fuel stations for the general public.

Businesses interested in partnering in this effort should contact Bill Young with Space Coast Clean Cities at 1-321-638-1443 or on the web at www.clean-cities.org or contact Cynthia Lambert at MetroPlan at 407-481-5672. Find them on the web at Central Florida Clean Air Team.

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