

Biodiesel, natural gas grow in popularity with drivers

When Dan Dolson revs his new car, the engine hums and the exhaust smells a bit like stir fry.

On a mechanic's advice, Dolson fuels his Volkswagen Jetta with biodiesel fuel — a vegetable oil-based fuel that runs in diesel engines.

Biodiesel fuel is more expensive — about \$2.50 a gallon. But that's not an issue. The Renton man averages 43 miles per gallon, and cost wasn't his primary concern. "It seems like the right kind of stuff to use for an environmentally safe area," he said.

Although alternative fuels are increasingly seen in government vehicles, businesses and individual consumers are beginning to follow that lead. The attraction, they say, is a cleaner burning fuel and lower maintenance costs on their vehicles.

Government agencies have added alternative-fuel vehicles since a 1992 federal law required them to be part of fleet purchases. The city of Seattle has about 150 natural-gas vehicles. Last fall, Tacoma became the first Northwest city to switch its entire fleet of waste and recycling trucks to a biodiesel blend.

Now some local businesses are turning to alternative-fuel vehicles.

Pioneer Organics, a Fremont-based organic-grocery delivery service, bought a compressed natural-gas van last year and plans to add more to its fleet this year. In the fall, Ballard Hardware and Supply bought a natural-gas van to pair with a gasoline-fueled van on daily deliveries.

Costs for the gasoline-fueled van average about 19 cents a mile, said Doug Freyberg of Ballard Hardware. But natural gas costs only 11 cents a mile and does less wear and tear. "If this goes well, I can see us replacing our other van with a (natural-gas) van," Freyberg said.

Use of alternative-fuel vehicles has increased steadily in recent years. Of the more than 450,000 used in the U.S. last year, about 8,500 were in Washington, the U.S. Department of Energy said.

Locally, most of the interest has been for vehicles powered by natural gas and biodiesel, said Linda Graham, coordinator of the Puget Sound Clean Cities Coalition.

The public-private partnership affiliated with the U.S. Energy Department works to implement fuel alternatives.

Natural gas, composed mostly of methane, burns more cleanly than gasoline, Graham said. It also is cheaper than gasoline and historically has had a more stable price. But the financial benefit comes in the long term because converting a vehicle to natural gas can cost thousands of dollars.

Biodiesel fuel can be produced domestically from agricultural products. Popular in Europe, it does not require vehicle modifications. But the alternative fuel is expensive because there is no local manufacturer, and transportation costs add to the price. Graham said consumers are slow to switch to fuels that aren't widely available. But manufacturers won't support more fueling centers without the demand.

While government agencies have fueling stations, the only local place for businesses and the public to buy biodiesel fuel in the Seattle area is Dr. Dan's Alternative Fuel Werks in Ballard.

Owner Dan Freeman said alternative fuel hasn't been a money-making venture, and he supports himself through auto repair. But concerns about the fuel industry drove him to pursue alternative fuels. He has been selling natural gas for seven years and biodiesel fuel for six months.

There are tax incentives to buying alternative vehicles. A federal tax deduction is available for buying or converting to "clean" fuel vehicles.

Graham said the Clean Cities Coalition is receiving more inquiries about fuel alternatives.

"These things work," she said. "This isn't some strange futuristic technology."

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