

# FILL 'ER UP — WITH ALTERNATIVE FUELS

Ferris's IS 3100ZP propane mower

Gasoline's economic and ecologic impact has many looking at new ways to power their mowers and handheld equipment.

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS MANAGING EDITOR

CONTRACTORS MIGHT BE feeling a familiar dull ache in the scars left from last summer's spike in fuel prices: This May and June, gasoline prices began climbing again. While far from the \$4 peaks that had contractors scrambling, the fear (or inevitability) of another rise have many looking at alternative ways to fuel their tools of the trade.

Proponents of alternative fuels claim their products are cheaper than gasoline, are better for the environment and require fewer trips to the repair shop — all of which contribute directly to the bottom line. The latest entrant into the commercial market — introduced in April — is Dixie Chopper's compressed natural gas (CNG) mower.

"This is the next step, in our opinion," says Rick Judy, Dixie Chopper's media marketing manager. "In the very near future, CNG is going to be where propane is now."

Whether it's CNG, propane or electric, the future, these manufacturers argue, is not going to be with gasoline.

"That's where our society is going," Judy says. "People are putting bids out, large manufacturers and cities are looking for people to cut their grass and they are looking for green, commercial cutters. We've sold a lot of propane

mowers because of that. The commercial guy needs to start looking in that direction. There's a lot of money to be made out there to be the first guy to 'go green' in your community."

## Overcoming concerns

Contractors unfamiliar with the alternative options typically raise three concerns when considering a propane mower: safety, availability and fuel supply.

"The first thing you hear when you pull a propane mower into a show," Judy says, "is 'you've got two bombs, one on either side of you.'"

Judy counters that the forklift industry has been using propane tanks safely for years. Besides, the same people who express concerns over a propane mower often think nothing of going home at the end of the day and firing up their propane grills, he says.

Manufacturers of propane lawn equipment hope a similar attitude of acceptance will carry over to mowers.

"The time for alternative fuel is ripe, more so than it ever has been before," says Jim Lawton, commercial sales manager for Ferris Industries. "The forklift industry was there 20 years ago; they put some incentives in for conversions. We look at that industry today, and the majority of them are running around with those 33-lb. cylinders on the back of them and nobody thinks any more of it."

Ferris joined the propane movement when the company was purchased by Briggs & Stratton, which already had a propane engine, Lawton says.

"It was a perfect one-two combination," he says. "It's really all driven from demand. In the Austin, TX, area we've had dealers doing mower conversions — and we've been selling equipment over the last three years with some pretty nice success."

What may slow the acceptance of propane and CNG



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## ALTERNATIVE FUELS

mowers in other areas, however, is the limited availability of the fuel. Dixie Chopper's CNG mower requires refilling the tanks, and not all areas of the country have the infrastructure for easy supply. In those instances, there are portable filling stations contractors can carry on their trucks and trailers. And for those who do business in areas that are equipped, there is a type of fill station that can be installed to feed off an existing natural gas line.



### MANUFACTURERS WITH ALTERNATIVE FUEL EQUIPMENT

#### Propane

Bad Boy  
Dixie Chopper  
EnviroGard  
Ferris Industries  
Husqvarna  
Lehr  
Scag Power Equipment  
Zipper

#### Compressed Natural Gas

Dixie Chopper

#### Electric

Hustler

— Propane Education & Resource Council

For contractors looking to make an immediate switch to an alternative fuel, there are conversion kits. But manufacturers warn that the engines may not run as efficiently because they were originally designed for gasoline.

### The environment

While the alternative mowers have a higher up-front cost, some states subsidize the cost of the machines — putting them on par with their gasoline brethren. So, why all the fuss? According to PERC: "Propane engines run clean without sacrificing performance — delivering approximately 20% savings on fuel costs over gasoline while reducing hydrocarbon emissions by nearly 70%."

There are a number of other advantages in addition to reducing the impact to the environment. Propane is about 30% less expensive

than gasoline, Lawton says.

There's also the longevity factor. "Engines that run propane tend to last two to three times longer than their comparable gasoline equipment," says Bernardo J. Herzer, CEO/founder of Lehr. "An engine that runs propane also tends to have less maintenance issues. Between 80% and 90% of the problems generated with small handheld internal combustion engines are derived from carburetion."

Both propane and CNG are still in their infancy, especially in the United States. By comparison, Herzer notes, nearly a third of the vehicles in Europe run on one or the other gasoline alternative.

"Around the world, natural gas and propane are much more commonly used as an alternative fuel for consumers," Herzer says, adding, "In the U.S. it is coming — and it's coming very quickly." LHM