Claus Sauter, Bioenergy Expert, Founder & CEO of VERBIO AG addresses current issues of (bio)energy, energy security and (green) mobility

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Column

Rather with CNG

Are the days of good old diesel over? Not quite – but the reputation of good old diesel is seriously damaged. It doesn't have a good standing in media headlines or in the minds of car drivers. It is a danger to our health, and it does enormous damage to the environment as it has the highest level of fine-particle and nitrogen oxide emissions among the current fuels available.

Modern exhaust treatment systems for Euro 6 diesel achieve acceptable results under test conditions, but in real-life conditions there are problems with nitrogen pollution levels which often exceed the emission limits. Just in the last month a test performed by the German Federal Environment Office documented diesel vehicles which exceed the EU limits for safe nitrogen oxide emissions by up to six times, and this among vehicles which meet current Euro 6 emission standards. In practice, then, even modern diesel vehicles are really muck spreaders, which is why, in future, they will be affected more and more by temporary or permanent bans from city centre traffic.

However, this isn’t just an image problem for diesel; in fact, the problem is far worse than that. There is a fundamental problem with using this fuel. Diesel is dangerous to our health and to our environment, and current technologies do not really offer a solution to this. Dieselgate is the Fukushima of the German automobile industry. The manufacturers can only bring the situation under control by using ever more expensive technologies.

This is where the automobile manufacturers and diesel drivers begin a search for alternatives. But where can a viable alternative be found for high-mileage drivers who are looking for a fuel which is both long-range and which gives a cost advantage over petrol-driven vehicles? Clearly not with an electric car, even though politicians might want us to believe that. Electric vehicles that are affordable for a broad number of drivers are a long way off. There are big question marks over the fuel ranges of the vehicles, the battery charging infrastructure and the charging time, alongside a host of unsolved challenges. Even the Chancellor is backing down and admitted recently that the target of a million electric cars by 2020 is not achievable.

However, don’t worry; the situation is not all doom and gloom, as Dieselgate might currently suggest. There is a user-friendly, affordable alternative already available, one that provides environmentally friendly mobility which protects our health and the wallet of the high-mileage driver. This alternative is natural gas vehicles, powered by CNH or by pure biomethane created from waste materials.

CNG (Compressed Natural Gas), often still labelled natural gas at German filling stations, is a high performance 130 octane fuel which combines a great driving experience and common sense. The purchase price of a natural gas vehicle is comparable with the cost of a diesel vehicle, while the fuel costs for a vehicle under typical usage conditions are approximately 30 percent less. Vehicle taxes and insurance are also significantly lower than for a diesel vehicle.

A CNG-powered vehicle is not just good for your pocket, it is also the best alternative for the environment and for our health. Natural gas vehicles emit no fine particles and 90 percent less nitrogen oxide than diesel vehicles – and that without the use of additional exhaust treatment systems. Further, CNG can be manufactured from a 100 percent renewable energy source, in the form of biomethane manufactured from straw. This reduces the CO_2 emissions by up to 90 percent compared to diesel and petrol. Such high performance cannot even be matched by an electric car powered by Germany’s current electricity mix, only 30 percent of which is generated from renewable sources. Four bales of straw are enough to create enough biomethane to power a medium-sized CNG-powered passenger vehicle for a year.

Despite all this, I already hear a “but” from diesel drivers: what about the fuel range? There is a wide range of natural gas vehicles in serial production, offered by various vehicle manufacturers. Depending on the particular model, the range can be up to 600 kilometres without a fuel stop. That is only a little less than most diesel vehicles can offer today, and comfortably within the distance to the next toilet break or coffee stop, which can be easily combined with a fuel stop. In Germany, a network of 900 CNG filling stations provides adequate coverage. Most of Germany’s neighbouring countries (Italy, for example) have an even more comprehensive network of filling stations, or are in the process of ramping up (for example, France).

Finally, Germany’s largest automobile group and manufacturer of the largest natural gas vehicle fleet is making a contribution: VW boss Matthias Mueller, together with partners from the energy and automobile industries, has made an announcement that they intend to double the number of CNG filling stations in Germany by 2025, and to bring a million registered CNG powered vehicles onto the roads – a ten-fold increase on the current number.

Hats off, Mr Mueller! You can be assured of our full support, and a contribution from us in the form of sufficient supplies of biomethane produced from waste materials!

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