

# WASTE & RECYCLING NEWS

## Natural gas gains traction

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Jim Johnson

Compressed natural gas-powered travel is no longer the sole provenance of the socially aware or environmentally challenged.

Once reserved for places like California, the use of compressed-natural-gas-powered trash trucks is undergoing an explosion of sorts around the country as companies and communities alike see the economic and environmental benefits.

Make no mistake, however, the number of natural gas-powered trucks is still low in comparison to the country's entire garbage truck fleet.

But the numbers are growing and sometimes rather quickly – even in smaller locales such as West Seneca, N.Y., and Blaine, Minn.

Both Waste Management Inc. and Republic Services Inc., the two largest private solid waste management companies in the country, are devoting millions of dollars to convert significant portions of their fleets to CNG vehicles.

"We think it is the right thing to do as a country and as a company to reduce our dependence on foreign fuels. With the abundance of natural gas in North America, it helps us there," said Chip Wertz, national director of fleet facility infrastructure at Waste Management.

"It's the right thing to do environmentally, reducing our emissions and helping our customers and our communities move toward reducing their emissions as well," he said.

As the largest trash company in the country, when Waste Management decides to do something, it has the ability to do it big.

Adopting CNG is no exception.

The company has 17 CNG fueling stations, mostly located on the West Coast, and about 10 more in the final design stages. About 20 other projects are in the planning stage. Waste Management's plans include the sites in New York and Minnesota.

"Some of our goals center around reducing emissions nationwide within our fleets. We have a goal to reduce our emissions by 15% by 2020, and going to natural gas as a fuel is going to be one of the major ways that we're going to be able to do that," Wertz said. "We obviously just can't do that in one location we need to do that nationwide as a company. We're looking to expand the use of natural gas within our fleet nationwide."

Republic Services' Roy Svehla, senior manager of fleet maintenance, said his company has about 500 CNG-powered vehicles around the country.

"It's a technology whose time has come. I wouldn't have said that five years ago," he said.

When Joanna D. Underwood started paying attention to the refuse industry in the late 1990s, there were maybe 300 natural gas-powered garbage vehicles in the entire United States.

Now president of Energy Vision, a New York City nonprofit group interested in petroleum-free fuels and renewable energy, she estimates the total to be somewhere around 4,000. And the number is increasing all the time.

But that is still small compared to the estimated 136,000 trash trucks on the road.

Energy Vision plans to release separate reports later this year looking at the overall CNG truck market in the U.S. and what's happening on the East Coast.

Companies and municipalities around the country are looking to CNG as both a way to save fueling costs and help the environment. Veolia ES Solid Waste Inc., for example, has introduced CNG trucks in Fort Myers, Fla., and Northbrook, Ill., spokeswoman Denisse Ike said. The company also plans to introduce CNG-based service to Port Orange, Fla.

Casella Waste Systems Inc. recently purchased three CNG trucks for its Burlington, Vt., operations and constructed a fueling station in Williston, Vt.

"I think the tipping point is coming, but still the number of natural gas refuse trucks on the road is still in the single digits, still a few percent of the total," Underwood said. "There is definitely acceleration in the pace of change."

Republic Services has about 230 additional CNG trucks on order for the remainder of this year and the company says its total could be close to 800 such vehicles before the calendar turns to 2012.

But that's not all, Svehla added. "We could deliver up to possibly 600 of them next year," he said.

"[Natural] gas offers some inherent advantages. The technology does some with an investment. You have to have a fueling station. You have to make some shop modifications so you can work on them. You've got some training involved with folks," he said. "But the flip side of it is the fuel is cheaper; it is a domestic fuel; trucks are quiet; guys like them. Performance is pretty much equal to diesels," Svehla said.

Jeffrey Swertfeger, marketing and communications director at McNeilus Companies Inc. in Dodge Center, Minn., has witnessed first-hand the growth of CNG-powered vehicles over the years.

"There's more interest every day," he said. "Every year that we've been involved in CNG, it continues to get better and better and better."

"Our numbers are certainly increasing every month in terms of the people, the customers who are buying this product. The questions that are coming in, the hits on the web, the requests for more information, more and more people are realizing CNG is the way to go."

CNG-powered vehicles account for "way more than 20%" of McNeilus' annual production, Swertfeger said.

Federally mandated pollution control requirements for heavy-duty diesel trucks that went into place in 2007 and 2010 has helped narrow the price difference between traditional engines and CNG-powered units.

With diesel engines now being more complicated and more costly to operate, the difference between the two units has fallen from \$60,000 to \$80,000 per truck at one point to about \$30,000 or so, Underwood said. "Natural gas trucks are definitely gaining an advantage. They're cleaner and they're easier to operate," she maintained.

"To me, this is really exciting," Underwood said. "What's happening now is extraordinary progress. It's taking up this issue seriously. ... We really are beginning a new day."

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