Biogas in Brussels: Finally on the Policy Agenda as a Vehicle Fuel

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Biogas, particularly as a vehicle fuel has had a challenging time getting on the European alternative fuel policy agenda but it appears that renewable methane for vehicles is finally "on the list." That's according to the European Commission (EC) project directors who spoke at the final workshop of the EC-funded project Biogasmax in Brussels on 14th September 2010.

Biogas: Historically hard to define?

In the run-up to the first European Union (EU) 2003 Biofuels Directive the natural gas vehicle (NGV) industry fought persistently and successfully to get renewable biogas defined in the legislation, enabling policymakers and stakeholders to understand that there are two categories of biofuels: liquid and gaseous. Formal recognition of the term 'biomethane' came in 2006 when NGV advocates were able to broaden the definition of natural gas to become natural gas/biomethane in the Euro 5 and Euro 6 standards. Nevertheless, recognition of biogas as a vehicle fuel still faced hurdles. During the 2007-2008 energy and climate debate that resulted in five directives at the end of 2008, biogas was defined in the Fuel Quality Directive and the Renewable Energy Directive but the policy advocates in Parliament and the Commission tended to regard biogas as a renewable option for electric generation. Now that view seems to be changing…finally.

On the agenda, in the process

The EC representative indicated that methane, fossil or biogas has a 'defined place' among the list of fuel alternatives being considered into the future, including: 1) electricity (including hydrogen and fuel cells); 2) bioliquids; and 3) methane.

The policy process for the development of a consistent European Transport Fuel Policy was outlined as a series of steps that should lead to a Commission Communication and possible legislative proposals by the end of 2011.

- Part of the input to the Commission's transport fuel policy will come from a report due in October from the Future Transport Fuels Expert Group, an expert stakeholder group organized in 2010 by DG Move. The group was gathered by the Commission to "advise them on the development of political strategies and concrete measures aiming at substituting fossil oil as transport fuel." (Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and compressed natural gas (CNG) are considered by the Commission as 'other supporting fuels.')
- Later a public consultation is foreseen to receive input from the wider public.
- This will lead to the development of a White Paper on the Future of Transport to 2050, likely in 2011.

Biogas as a vehicle fuel was one of the main themes of the Biogasmax project, funded in 2006 at a €7.49 million (USD 10.2 million) under the 6th Framework Program. The four year project had eight biogas demonstration sites in five countries, with the Municipality of Lille as the coordinator of the overall project. The project partners put more than 900 biogas vehicles on the roads throughout their partner cities including buses, garbage trucks and a variety of urban vehicles.

This past June the Commission also asked Biogasmax project experts to provide direct input to the relatively new effort to create a European biomethane standard within the Commission's standard development group, the Committee for European Normalization (CEN). A harmonized, European biomethane standard will help pave the way for more countries to develop regulations and procedures for grid-injection of upgraded biogas. There are 28 European countries that produce biogas. Currently there are seven European countries that provide for biomethane grid-injection. Luxembourg and the UK have plans for grid injection and other countries are in the process of creating the regulatory framework to do so. The countries currently doing grid injection — Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland — have established their own national standards for

biomethane. The upgraded biomethane in some countries is used directly as a vehicle fuel delivered either through its own dedicated pipeline or transported by truck as CNG and, in a few cases, as LNG.

Directive 2009/73/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 Concerning Common Rules for the Internal Market in Natural Gas (and repealing Directive 2003/55/EC) is clear in the obligations of Member States to allow non-discriminatory access to the natural gas pipeline grid. The directive also says, however, that grid injection is conditional upon gas quality requirements being fulfilled and that the gas be "permanently compatible with the relevant technical rules and safety standards. Those rules and standards should ensure that those gases can technically and safely be injected into, and transported through the natural gas system and should also address their chemical characteristics."

There are many remaining challenges facing biomethane, CNG and LNG within the Commission's policy frameworks and in Member States. Concerns about biomethane quality from landfill and sewage feedstock are being studied but some countries still prohibit it's injection into the pipeline although for electric generation it is allowed. Seasonal injection also will be an issue, when gas demand is low but production of renewable biogas remains high. Also, with the focus on renewable biogas questions remain about how policy makers will deal with CNG and LNG as 'fossil fuels.' But recognition of biomethane within the context of the Future Transport Fuels Policy is a major positive step for the NGV industry as a whole although the details will have to be worked carefully through the policy process as it develops over the next several years.

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