



Eight-year-old Nicole Seisler refuels her father's natural gas vehicle in the driveway of their Alexandria, Va., home. NGV proponents showcased the ease with which consumers can refuel at home there and in Dallas last week with units manufactured by FuelMaker Corp. of Vancouver, B.C.

Gas Vehicle Demonstrations Highlight Refueling Ease, But Obstacles Remain

By Nick Snow

Natural gas vehicle proponents beat their drums last week with a pair of media events designed to show how easily consumers could operate and refuel cars that run on compressed natural gas.

Washington-based reporters visited the Alexandria, Va., home of Jeffrey Seisler, executive director of the Natural Gas Vehicle Coalition, whose eight-year-old daughter, Nicole, refueled the family's flex-fuel station wagon.

The next day, members of the Dallas press saw a similar demonstration at the home of independent producer T. Boone Pickens Jr., where a similar demonstration was offered by his wife, Bea.

Both featured an outdoor refueling appliance manufactured by FuelMaker Corp. of Vancouver, B.C. The company, which handles its U.S. sales from an office in Salt Lake City, is a joint venture of Salt Lake-based Questar Corp., B.C. Gas Inc. of Vancouver, and Sulzer Brothers Ltd. of Switzerland, which designed the appliance.

The company shipped its 1,000th unit in July, according to U.S. Sales Manager Sam Blundell, and has sold 200 to 250 since. He told *The Oil Daily* that FuelMaker is constructing a plant in Toronto so it can triple production.

Obstacles Remain

But while both events easily demonstrated that NGV refueling

clearly is "user-friendly," neither could do much more than acknowledge the formidable political and economic obstacles that currently keep such alternative fueled vehicles and appliances out of most consumers' reach.

These obstacles include substantial initial costs (for not only buying a refueling unit, but also converting a motor vehicle), the lack of public refueling stations and the space that CNG tanks take up on a car or truck.

The last problem was made apparent by the size of the converted vehicle in each demonstration: Seisler's is a Ford Crown Victoria station wagon, while Pickens drives a Cadillac.

Seisler and other proponents acknowledge that the shortage of available public refueling locations makes it necessary initially for most vehicles to be "bi-fuel" instead of dedicated to natural gas.

"Bridge Strategy"

"This is, however, a 'bridge strategy' to the time in the very near future when the 'Big Three' car manufacturers begin building factory-produced, dedicated (natural gas only) cars and trucks," the NGV Coalition executive continued.

He reported that Detroit automakers currently are in various stages of NGV product planning and development, with the first 2,000 field test pickup trucks scheduled to be delivered during 1992's first quarter.

Rep. Robert Wise, D-W.Va., who attended the Washington area demonstration, said that he currently has to drive a flex-fuel vehicle. But he added that plans call for a public refueling station network to be in place in West Virginia within six months.

As for financing, Blundell said that gas utilities might try to develop a monthly equipment charge for units like the FuelMaker, which costs \$3,000 to purchase. Several Canadian local distribution companies charge fleet operators and homeowners \$49.95 per month in such instances, he noted.