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## **ALT FUELS: Low-profile propane autogas goes looking for friends on the Hill** (07/26/2011)

**Jason Plautz, E&E reporter**

Texas tycoon T. Boone Pickens has made himself the face of the natural gas industry. The flamboyant oil man has invested millions in his push to fuel cars with natural gas and is trailed by cameras and microphones during his frequent visits to Capitol Hill.

Pickens' ability to grab attention for natural gas is much envied by its underdog rival, propane autogas.

Natural gas "is getting all the publicity, and we don't want to be disadvantaged," said Stuart Weidie, the leader of the industry group Autogas for America. "We're not an experimental deal. We're here, we're available."

But propane autogas -- a popular fuel in the rest of the world -- has yet to catch on in the United States. Weidie's group is trying to change that but has made little headway with consumers and policymakers so far. Most Americans consider propane as a fuel for a barbecue, not a car, and the industry's lobbying hasn't been up to the task of changing that perception.

The most painful snub for the industry was its omission from a House bill promoting natural gas as an alternative fuel. Propane supporters had hoped to get a mention in the measure sponsored by Rep. John Sullivan (R-Okla.) and championed by Pickens ([Greenwire](#), April 26).

Now the industry has decided to go on the offensive.

Autogas for America launched a [video ad](#) and is circulating a brief drawing a direct comparison between propane and natural gas. The group has started a [blog](#) called American Fuel Facts and Weidie said they will soon start targeting electric vehicles, ethanol and other biofuels.

Weidie's group is now also looking for Hill supporters for its own bill, the "Propane Green Autogas Solutions Act" ([H.R. 2014](#) and [S. 1120](#)). The bill would offer a five-year extension on existing credits for the fuel, refueling stations and conversion technology.



Stuart Weidie. Photo courtesy of Blossman Gas.

"Our position is that everybody ought to have the opportunity for subsidies or nobody should have them," Weidie said. "At the end of the day, our policymakers should be creating an environment where we're using American fuels, but they shouldn't decide which ones are going to accomplish objectives."

Dave Hurst, a senior analyst with Pike Research who researches alternative fuels, said propane's push to make a dent in the U.S. transportation market is hamstrung by a lack of visibility. No major automaker offers an autogas vehicle and there has been little movement on conversions.

"The main advantage to it is that you can put a giant propane storage tank in a relatively small space. Fleets can set it up for relatively little cost," Hurst said. "But there's been very little movement on the passenger vehicle side. Partially that's because the lobbying effort hasn't been very strong."

Merribel Ayres, founder of the Washington, D.C., lobbying firm Lighthouse Consulting Group, said an industry fighting for recognition on the Hill needs to establish a stakeholders network that includes lobbyists but should look for more than just an "escort service" to congressional offices.

"It's critical to be building your network, through association members and other partners like a professional firm that can help you build your platform," said Ayres, whose firm focuses on energy and environment clients. "They don't just need someone to open doors, but someone to shape issues and see where the intersection of the current climate and public policy and new technology is."

## No star power

If propane autogas has a U.S. face or a voice, it is Weidie's. And the former minor league baseball player and president of a family-owned business in North Carolina is decidedly low profile and soft-spoken.

For his part, Weidie said he prefers to let the industry's numbers speak for themselves. Consider, he said, citing Department of Energy statistics, that it costs about \$175,000 to build an autogas fueling station, compared to more than \$400,000 for a natural gas station. And despite all the natural gas industry's crowing about price and emissions, he said, autogas propane's numbers in those categories are just as good as its rival's.

But numbers alone don't make a sale on Capitol Hill or on Main Street.

"It used to be that almost no one we would talk to had any knowledge about autogas, even though here we are as the number 3 fuel in the world," said Tucker Perkins, chief operating officer and president of the trade group CleanFUEL USA. "I would definitely say it's better, but by no means have we reached the point where we can say the job is done. We're not even close to that."

The major problem, Tucker said, is the structure of the industry. Whereas natural gas has several large companies with deep pockets, the propane industry is made up of thousands of small companies. The national lobbying the industry has done has largely been focused around the more lucrative areas like home heating, industrial and agricultural use.

Weidie's two decades of experience in the propane industry exemplifies autogas' problems.

In 1991, Weidie joined Blossman gas, a family- and employee-owned company, and rose through the ranks to be named president in 2001. Although the company is one of the largest in the industry, operating in 14 states, its autogas output has fallen off sharply.

According to Weidie, 20 percent of Blossman's sales in the '70s and '80s were going to the transportation sector but that fell to less than 1 percent in the following years. As propane-powered cars lost their hold on the marketplace, companies like Blossman turned to local sales of heating oil and fuel for industrial products.

To help unite the fractured industry, Weidie helped to found Alliance Autogas three years ago, a marketing cooperative to provide conversion centers and unite autogas companies. A little over a year later, Weidie turned that national network toward a lobbying effort by founding Autogas for America.

"T. Boone Pickens had launched the Pickens plan for wind and natural gas vehicles in the prior year," he said. "We believe as an industry and our customers believe that we've got a better solution. We felt like we needed a platform to get our message across."

## Focus on fleets

Tucker said AFA has helped to "coalesce" everything that is going on in the industry, giving both businesses and policymakers a one-stop shop for autogas information. And while he praised the group's work in raising autogas' profile, he conceded that the industry was still "in the first inning of our efforts."

"I think where you used to poll all of Congress, less than 10 may have had a grasp of autogas and what we could do. Certainly now that's much higher," Tucker said.

But the industry recognizes its lobbying shortcomings. Saying AFA is "handicapped by not having someone with name recognition," Weidie joked that his group may need to follow the lead of other groups that recruited celebrities such as actress Jessica Alba, who has pitched for the Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families Coalition, or "Mad Men" star January Jones, who has appeared on the Hill to talk about marine wildlife issues.

"My wife wouldn't be too happy with that," Weidie said with a smile.

Besides, he said, the group does not need a pretty face to sell its fuel. Once propane becomes more integrated into the business community, the economic case will speak for itself.

"People are going to be more aware of it a year from now even more than in this past year, and it will be because we're building on real customers deploying it in their fleets," Weidie said. "They're going to be the heroes."