

Just the Basics

Liquefied Petroleum Gas

Although it is a fossil fuel, liquefied petroleum gas can help enhance the energy security of the United States and other significant emissions benefits. Commonly called propane, it is the most popular alternative fuel in the world.

What Is Liquefied Petroleum Gas?

More than 350,000 light-and medium-duty vehicles travel the nation's highways using liquefied petroleum gas (LPG or LP gas), while over 4 million vehicles use it worldwide. LPG is a mixture of several gases that is generally called "propane," in reference to the mixture's chief ingredient. LPG changes to the liquid state at the moderately high pressures found in an LPG vehicle's fuel tank.

LPG is formed naturally, interspersed with deposits of petroleum and natural gas. Natural gas contains LPG, water vapor, and other impurities that must be removed before it can be transported in pipelines as a salable product. About 55% of the LPG processed in the U.S. is from natural gas purification. The other 45% comes from crude oil refining. Since a sizable amount of U.S. LPG is derived from petroleum, LPG does less to relieve the country's dependency on foreign oil than some other alternative fuels. However, because over 90% of the LPG used here is produced here, LPG does help address the national security component of the nation's overall petroleum dependency problem.

What Are the Emissions Benefits of LPG?

Propane vehicles emit about one-third fewer reactive organic gases than gasoline-fueled vehicles. Nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide emissions are also 20% and 60% less, respectively. Unlike gasoline-fueled vehicles, there are no evaporative emissions while LPG vehicles are running or parked, because LPG fuel systems are tightly sealed. Small amounts of LPG may escape into the atmosphere during refueling, but these vapors are 50% less reactive than gasoline vapors, so they have less of a tendency to generate smog-forming ozone. LPG's extremely low sulfur content means that the fuel does not contribute significantly to acid rain.

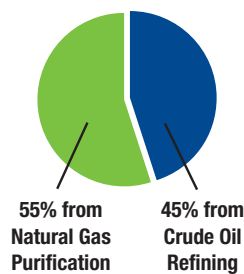
LPG Is a Good Fuel for Fleet Service

Many propane vehicles are converted gasoline vehicles. The relatively inexpensive conversion kits include a regulator/vaporizer that changes liquid propane to a gaseous form and an air/fuel mixer that meters and mixes the fuel with filtered intake air before the mixture is drawn into the engine's combustion chambers. Also included in conversion kits is closed-loop feedback circuitry that continually monitors the oxygen

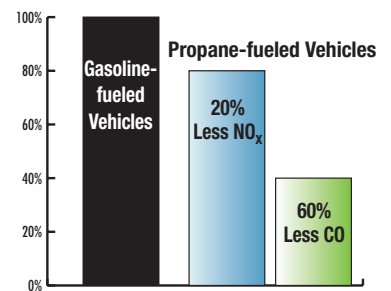


Less dependence on foreign oil, and eventual transition to an emissions-free, petroleum-free vehicle

Propane Production



Vehicle Emissions



vehicle systems

content of the exhaust and adjusts the air/fuel ratio as necessary. This device communicates with the vehicle's onboard computer to keep the engine running at optimum efficiency. LPG vehicles additionally require a special fuel tank that is strong enough to withstand the LPG storage pressure of about 130 pounds per square inch. The gaseous nature of the fuel/air mixture in an LPG vehicle's combustion chambers eliminates the cold-start problems associated with liquid fuels. In contrast to gasoline engines, which produce high emission levels while running cold, LPG engine emissions remain similar whether the engine is cold or hot. Also, because LPG enters an engine's combustion chambers as a vapor, it does not strip oil from cylinder walls or dilute the oil when the engine is cold. This helps LPG-powered engines to have a longer service life and reduced maintenance costs. Also helping in this regard is the fuel's high hydrogen-to-carbon ratio (C_3H_8), which enables propane-powered vehicles to have less carbon build-up than gasoline- and diesel-powered vehicles.

LPG delivers roughly the same power, acceleration, and cruising speed characteristics as gasoline. It does yield a somewhat reduced driving range, however, because it contains only about 70-75% of the energy content of gasoline. Its high octane rating (around 105) means, though, that an LPG engine's power output and fuel efficiency can be increased beyond what would be possible with a gasoline engine without causing destructive "knocking." Such fine-tuning can help compensate for the fuel's lower energy density.

Fleet owners find that propane costs are typically 5% to 30% less than those of gasoline. The cost of constructing an LPG fueling station is also similar to that of a comparably sized gasoline dispensing system. Fleet owners not wishing to establish fueling stations of their own may avail themselves of over 3,000 publicly accessible fueling stations nationwide.

How Safe Is LPG?

Propane is an odorless, nonpoisonous gas that has the lowest flammability range of all alternative fuels. High concentrations of propane can displace oxygen in the air, though, causing the potential for asphyxiation. This problem is mitigated by the presence of ethyl mercaptan, which is an odorant that is added to warn of the presence of gas. While LPG itself does not irritate the skin, the liquefied gas becomes very cold upon escaping from a high-pressure tank, and may therefore cause frostbite, should it contact unprotected skin.

As with gasoline, LPG can form explosive mixtures with air. Since the gas is slightly heavier than air, it may form a continuous stream that stretches a considerable distance from a leak or open container, which may lead to a flashback explosion upon contacting a source of ignition.

fuels & lubricants

emission control

A Strong Energy Portfolio for a Strong America

Energy efficiency and clean, renewable energy will mean a stronger economy, a cleaner environment, and greater energy independence for America. Working with a wide array of state, community, industry, and university partners, the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy invests in a diverse portfolio of energy technologies.



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