



PROPANE POWERED Commercial Mowers

By Laura Mohammad

THE INDUSTRY OF
PROPANE-POWERED
COMMERCIAL
LAWNMOWERS IS
ABOUT TO TAKE OFF,
AND AUSTIN IS AT
THE FOREFRONT.

With six companies displaying prototypes or selling or testing models, manufacturers throughout the nation are scrambling to jump on the “green” bandwagon with mowers that can produce 60-80 percent fewer emissions than traditional mowers and are kinder to the units’ engines. In fact, one, EnviroGard, is even painting its propane mower, well, green.

And with dozens of propane-powered commercial mowers in use throughout Austin, this green-loving city is one of the nation’s leaders,

says EnviroGard’s president, who is also the patent holder for low-polluting, propane-powered mowers.

Jim Coker, president of the Monroe, N.C.-based company, says Austin tops other cities in interest about propane-powered mowers. “This is a great example,” he said, referring to a recent “green” expo in Austin’s Zilker Park, which displayed the wares of about 15 exhibitors of both electric and propane outdoor equipment. “This is the biggest gathering I’ve seen,” of manufacturers or soon-to-be manu-

facturers of propane mowers, said Coker, as he stood beside his company's display of propane mowers at the Zilker expo.

Billy Morell, supervisor of vehicle services for Austin Independent School District, loves the fact that propane is dramatically cheaper and his propane mowers can sit in the winter without adverse effects, unlike traditional mowers.

Another Austin-based, enthusiastic proponent of propane mowers is Richard Blake, co-owner of McCoy's Lawn Equipment. He loves propane so much that he has launched a second business, 3-year-old Environmental Propane Conversions, which he says is about to go nationwide.

In the propane-mower conversion business for six years, Blake is now selling factory-made

Brands' commercial sales manager for a five-state area that includes Texas. "We are really talking about the infancy stages," he says of the propane-mower industry. The launch of Ferris-manufactured units "is all based on demand. Cities are being asked to look at alternative fuels, and the (public) agencies and municipalities came to the dealers" asking for propane-powered units. "Eight percent of all emissions into our atmosphere is generated by the lawn and garden industry. Here is an opportunity to be able to go green and be ecologically responsible."

Propane-powered commercial mowers run about \$12,500 for a public agency, says Lawton, about \$2,000 more than the traditional models. But the savings in other ways make it worth it, says Coker. Propane is easier

Action Days. This is critical for his department, because there are weeks when the mowing can't stop, like in anticipation of football games or graduation ceremonies. "With this one, we're able to keep going," Burns says.

Burns broke into the propane business because the university administration is encouraging alternative fuels. The university has its own 2,000-gallon tank east of the campus that Burns uses. "So it's very handy."

One of the advantages of the factory-built mowers that are coming out on the market is that they include warranties from the manufacturers, something that converted mowers may not have.

Right now, the university department has seven active mowers and maintains 125 acres. Does Burns see an expansion of propane and



From left: Jim Coker, president of EnviroGard, Shawna McClure and Terry Gibson, both of Professional Polish Equipment, which is the Texas dealer for EnviroGard. Photo by Patrick Wilson, RRC



Jackie Richards of TPGA receives a driving lesson from Jim Lawton of EnviroGard at the May expo in Austin of alternative-fuel products. The expo was put on by Central Texas Clean Cities. Photo by Patrick Wilson, RRC

Ferris units; in fact, he recently sold one of the manufacturer's first propane units to The University of Texas in Austin.

Aside from the environmental advantages to propane, Blake likes the fact that propane is Texas-grown, which makes the customer less dependent on foreign oil.

A surprise plus for propane, proponents say, is the elimination of siphoning, an industry hazard in the commercial mowing business. Also, because the mowers have enclosed tanks, there is less likelihood of spillage. And that's another environmental advantage. According to statistics gathered by EnviroGard, about 17 million gallons of fuel are spilled each year by outdoor power equipment, more petroleum than was spilled in 1989 by the Exxon Valdez in Alaska's Prince William Sound.

James Lawton is Ferris & Snapper Pro

on the engine, for example, with engine oil staying cleaner, longer.

The team of John Burns, landscape manager for UT Austin, was going to have Blake convert a mower to propane when Blake asked if they could wait for a factory-built unit. Burns' team agreed, and the red Ferris IS3100 was delivered immediately after production began in the spring.

"It's been out every day we've been mowing, four days out of the week," says Burns. It has a "zero turn," which means it is operated off of levers rather than a steering wheel, and that made some of the operators a little nervous, he says. The unit has a single operator who is familiar with that mower design, and reports to Burns have been positive. One thing Burns likes about propane is that mowing can continue without guilt on Austin's Ozone

a move away from the diesel mowers?

"We need to give this one some time to evaluate," he says. "Based on what we know now, yes," they'll look at buying more propane mowers.

Darla Evans, a parks grounds supervisor with Austin Parks and Recreation Department, also uses two propane-powered mowers. Why does she like them? "More time on the mower, less time at the pump," she says. With two tanks on a mower, 7.5 gallons a tank, it takes about 10 hours to use up the propane, she says. The two Ferris models her team uses were converted last summer by McCoy's. They are used to mow 21 acres of park land, at Butler Park. Another Parks and Recreation division also uses a propane mower, she says.

"The city's leaning toward more propane, as well as electric and diesel," says Evans.



Michael Ashley of UT-Austin cuts grass with new Ferris propane-powered mower that the university bought in April. Photo credit: Luis Garza Jr., UT-Austin

“Everyone should be cleaner and greener.”
 “We’re chopping our trees down. We’re polluting our water. Can you imagine having an air tank on your back when you go outside?” Blake asks. “Propane can help solve our environmental problems.”

Another plus is that the propane mowers offer a 35 percent reduction in nitrous oxide emissions over traditional gas, says Stacy Neef,

coordinator of Central Texas Clean Cities, which promotes the use of alternative fuels in all or part of six counties. One disadvantage is lack of education, according to Neef; technicians need to be informed on maintenance and a bottle-refill plan has to be in place.

“The guys who are going to be using the mowers need to have a buy-in on this,” says Neef. “They are the ones who are going to

be riding them, mowing with them. If (the operator) doesn’t have a buy-in, (the administration) is going to be fighting up hill.”

Rodger McCants, Texas territory manager for Dixie Chopper, says that one concern he hears is that propane fill stations aren’t readily available. Not true, he says. He lives in a rural area about 60 miles north of Houston. “I can leave my house and go three miles and get gas; I can go four miles and get propane,” he says. “We’re used to going down the street and there are five gas stations. ... You just have to go to a little bit of trouble to know where they are.”

But: “The hardest thing about propane is getting people to understand that propane tanks are safer. People see them as two time bombs attached.”

“It’s an exciting time,” says Heather Ball, marketing director for the Texas Railroad Commission’s Alternative Fuel, Research and Education Division. “It’s a huge market.”

While RRC’s rebate dollars for converting mowers dried up several years ago, Neef has filed a grant proposal with the Washington, D.C.-based Propane Education & Research Council that would be used to give rebates for propane mowers, possibly conversions. “I would like to see \$100,000 for 40 mowers, at \$2,500 per mower,” she says. “I’m just keeping my fingers crossed.”

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