

Auto fleets could put U.S. on the green highway. It's going to take momentum to leave gas behind

In the absence of a government-launched Manhattan Project to ignite the alternative fuel revolution, the public must turn not just to the White House or the state capitol but also to the largest fleet owners in the country. Carmakers such as Honda, BMW and Toyota are waiting for only one thing before they commit their considerable resources away from gasoline cars and toward hydrogen, electric, natural gas or other alternatively fueled vehicles. Those companies want tangible demand. Fleets -- governmental, commercial and private -- have a compelling volume purchasing power no automaker can ignore.

For-hire carriers in 2004 operated 675,000 trucks; the top 10 include such companies as UPS, Federal Express and Yellow Roadway. UPS alone deploys about 80,000 brown trucks daily as it makes 13 million deliveries every 24 hours. Only about 1,000 of UPS' huge fleet ran on compressed natural gas as of this summer. Within Federal Express' 70,000-vehicle fleet, the company operated 30,000 medium-duty trucks, of which fewer than 100 were hybrid diesel as of this summer.

About 6 million additional vehicles are owned by private commercial fleets such as Sysco, Wal-Mart, Halliburton and Frito-Lay. Wal-Mart alone operates 3,300 trucks that in 2005 drove 455 million miles to make 900,000 deliveries. Verizon operated 70,000 trucks and cars in 2004. Waste Management operated about 28,000 vehicles in 2004. Krispy Kreme Donuts operated 750 vehicles in 2004. City, state and federal agencies, as well as universities, comprise just a fraction of America's 38,000 private fleets.

Today, alternative fuel vehicles are ready -- or fast becoming ready -- to roll out en masse. If fleet managers adopted a green fleet initiative, that is a hierarchy of purchasing that mandates hydrogen cars first, fully electric cars second and CNG cars third, the race would be on among all truck and heavy-duty vehicle manufacturers from GM to Mercedes to be the first to fill those orders. Volume purchasing would multiply and accelerate the technology, bring down costs and migrate such vehicles swiftly from commercial fleets to average consumers.

Therefore, the public and environmentally conscious companies can choose to ship green, shop green, drink green and even communicate green. For example, in choosing an overnight shipper will it be Federal Express or UPS? In buying soda, will it be Coke or Pepsi? Corporate policies, such as nondiscrimination, labor fairness, environmental damage and other conduct, are already determining factors for many in choosing where to place their business. Therefore, there is more power in one petition to UPS and Federal Express than to all the members of Congress combined.

The federal government itself maintains America's single largest fleet by far -- about 600,000 vehicles. Environmental groups have consistently sued the federal government to compel it to follow its own alternative-fuel guidelines. The Energy Policy Act, passed after the first Gulf War, mandates that all federal agencies reduce oil dependence by ensuring that 75 percent of new vehicle purchases use alternative fuels. The law has been totally ignored. A steady cascade of court rulings has rejected government requests for delays. Government purchases alone could spur the rapid adoption of any category of alternative fuel vehicle -- hydrogen or otherwise.

Governments and regimes since the time of the timber-hoarding pharaohs have declined to embrace a public policy that exercises sane stewardship over energy and those who control it. Many believe the notion that man inherits the Earth. Not so. He only holds it as a precious legacy for succeeding generations. That inheritance must not be squandered or reduced to rubble because of the war, industrial epidemic, or ecocidal damage arising from the intoxicating but nonetheless toxic fumes of internal combustion.

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