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What's holding up U.S. fuel efficiency?

Have we all been suckered by big business? Has American technology been sacrificed on the altar of the almighty dollar? Are we all at the mercy of big oil? At least one county resident believes so, and he certainly has me thinking.

Pat Dunlap

In fact, Byron Wine of Manassas has gone beyond the evidence-collecting stage. He doubled the gas mileage of a perfectly ordinary Ford Pinto by rerouting fuel lines. Perhaps more important, Wine has spent many years trying to convince government officials that the technology that produces fuel economy exists. He's been ignored at every level, from state Sen. Chuck Colgan, who lives just down the road from him, to U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy.

In fact, according to the documents Mr. Wine shared with me, the technology isn't even new. In 1949, a 1947 Studebaker achieved 149.95 miles per gallon. In 1968, a modified 1959 Fiat 600 got 244.35 mpg, and in 1973, a 1959 Opel actually hit 376.59 mpg.

The secret lies in the carburetor, according to Wine and two mechanics he has worked with. One, the late Tom Ogle of El Paso, Texas, developed a vaporizing system that produced as much as 140 mpg in his Ford Galaxy. Shell Oil offered Ogle a million bucks for his invention, but fearing attempts to shelve the gas-efficient carburetor, he turned them down.

Kansas physicist Don Novak, a former aircraft engineer, gets 218 mpg with his carburetor. One of his students achieved 230 mpg in a Chevy Blazer. Novak is outspoken concerning his own safety. Because his invention is unacceptable to the automobile and oil industries, Novak honestly expects somebody, someday, to assassinate him. Tom Ogle, whose work was featured in the August 1977 issue of *Argosy* magazine, died suddenly in 1981 under suspicious circumstances. According to Wine, that particular issue of *Argosy* is missing from the shelves of the Library of Congress.

But there's more. The well-known Chevy Nova was introduced to the British market offering 100 kilometers per liter, or approximately 200 miles per gallon. The 1984 Peugeot 205 entered that same market at 52.3 mpg. It was unavailable in the United States. The best we could do that year was buy a Peugeot 505 with 28 mpg. Even with the slight difference between British and U.S. gallons, one has to wonder.

Would you believe that alternative fuels also exist, and that they work? BMW has a hydrogen-powered 735iL cruising through Bavaria. The German aviation industry is considering transitioning to hydrogen to fuel its aircraft. In liquid form, hydrogen gas contains two and a half times the energy of an equivalent weight of gasoline, and its only byproduct is water. Its main problem is one of distribution, and that's not that hard to overcome.

Saab has a fleet of buses running around on natural gas, and I personally have seen buses in California (yes, that is in America) that run about as cleanly and efficiently on propane.

How about gasohol? It's been estimated that by adding agriculturally produced ethanol to gasoline, the United States could save $4.5 billion in imported oil each year. Even better, mixing nine parts gasoline to 10 parts ethanol would reduce gasoline pollutants by 30 percent. Brazil has been using ethanol nationwide for more than a decade, and although it's a bit more expensive than gasoline, it's a renewable source of energy, unlike oil.

So, is Byron Wine a nut? I met with him for more than an hour, and spent days reviewing the documents he gave me, and I don't think so. Are we consumers trapped by profit-minded big business and a slow-to-react, possibly even conspiratorial, federal government? It wouldn't be the first time. Remember when Detroit teamed with big oil during the 1930s to do away with the electric trolley cars that ran through nearly every American city?

Redesigned carburetors and alternative energy sources offer this country its best solutions to the ongoing problems in the Middle East. We don't have to depend on oil, but our government officials don't seem to realize it. We have to find a way to remind them that, in America, hard work and ingenuity, not two-fisted military intervention, are the building blocks of success.

■ Ms. Dunlap lives in Dumfries.

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