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USAF Looks to Alternative Fuels to Cut Costs

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By: Clayton B. Reid

The U.S. Air Force is slashing \$3 billion from its fuel bill and reducing its reliance on foreign oil by weaning gas-guzzling aircraft off pure petroleum products and taking to the skies with cutting-edge synthetic fuels.

The goal is to have all Air Force planes sipping synthetic petrol by 2011, according to Pentagon officials. Already, all Air Force B-52 bombers have been certified to fly on mixed synthetic fuels.

Late last month, a massive C-17 Globemaster III cargo plane took off from California's Edwards Air Force Base powered for the first time with a mix of traditional jet fuel and synthetic fuel. Officials called the test flight a roaring success.

"Everything's going great," an Air Force official familiar with the project tells Newsmax. "The secretary of the Air Force says he wants us to develop a domestic source of alternative fuel to lessen dependency on foreign oil and give the Air Force sovereign options to fly, fight and win. We're doing it, and it works."

The Air Force is the biggest gas-gulper of all of the services by far, sucking up a whopping 2.6 billion gallons of fuel in 2006 at a cost of more than \$5.7 billion.

For every \$10 increase in a barrel of oil, Air Force costs jump \$610 million annually, according to assistant Air Force secretary William Anderson.

Last year, the cost of jet fuel jumped from 75 cents a gallon to \$2.01. That's a \$71,000 increase for just one fill-up of a B-52, which holds 47,000 gallons of fuel.

"Oil is selling for \$94 a barrel right now," the official, who asked not to be named, tells Newsmax. "The cost of synfuel is estimated to be between \$45 and \$60 a barrel. You do the math."

With 42 gallons per barrel, that's an annual savings of up to \$3 billion.

Best of all, using synthetic fuel does not require engine modification, according to Air Force officials. In fact, it may perform better than traditional aviation fuel.

"We are creating this synthetic fuel to be a drop-in fuel, as a replacement for straight JP-8," the Air Force official tells Newsmax. "It burns hotter than straight JP-8, which gives us potential performance enhancement. So later, we may be looking at engine modifications to capitalize on the fuel's advantages. Right now, it just goes straight into the tank."

In November, synthetic fuel tests will begin in Tennessee on B-1 bomber engines, as, one by one, the Air Force certifies its aircraft on the new fuels.

Creating synthetic fuel is not a new process – the Nazi Luftwaffe in oil-poor but coal-rich Germany flew on coal-based fuels in World War II. The so-called Fischer-Tropsch process, named for its inventors in the 1920s, produces fuel or lubricating oil from just about anything, but mainly from natural gas and coal.

With one-quarter of the world's coal reserves in the U.S., such fuels are a natural fit for its military. And, according to Air Force officials, synthetic fuel burns very clean — with nearly zero sulphur and very little particulate matter.

Still, the fuel production process has come under fire from environmentalists, who criticize coal mining techniques and claim synthetic fuel refineries release double the amount of carbon dioxide as their traditional petroleum counterparts.

"Coal is going to play big in the future, we believe," Anderson says. "We believe that we have to find an environmentally friendly way to mine coal and burn coal. We believe the technology is very close, and we believe that an organization with the market size and presence of the USAF can help move technology forward to make coal a much cleaner and greener alternative across the board."

The Air Force isn't stopping at coal and natural gas. The drive to reduce oil consumption has led engineers into some pretty strange places for new sources of energy, officials say. Researchers are experimenting with fuels made from switchgrass, poplar trees, and even chicken fat.

The Air Force is looking at several ways of producing such domestic synthetic fuel, including a collaboration between Conoco, Tyson Foods and Syntroleum.

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Commercial airlines, meanwhile, are also taking action. Planes flying out of Johannesburg, South Africa, now leave with tanks filled with a synthetic fuel mixture derived from coal. The Commercial Aviation Alternative Fuels Initiative hopes to switch to a form of synfuel by 2010.

While the U.S. will never be completely independent of oil, "what we're looking for is energy diversity. People say go to ethanol, but corn is not the entire answer. You would have to plant half the U.S. in corn to create enough ethanol. It doesn't make sense," the Air Force spokesman tells Newsmax.

"We are not out to harm the environment, but [for now] coal is the answer."

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