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Earth Day Guest Column

"As our country continues to grapple with the unprecedented health crisis from the COVID-19 outbreak, the 50th anniversary of Earth Day has come upon us as a reminder of another challenge," writes Michael A. Stivala, president of Suburban Propane Partners: "How to reduce our carbon footprint amidst the concern over the effects of climate change."

Stivala addresses that challenge here, in a guest column.



Michael A. Stivala, president and CEO of Suburban Propane Partners.

Fueling a Sustainable Energy Future with Propane

No doubt, lowering the level of harmful carbon emissions is important for the health and safety of our planet and the population in every country across the world.

Government leaders from around the world, and leaders in so many state and local governments right here in the United States, have set aggressive targets for reducing carbon emissions over the coming decades. However, much of the discussion and many of the incentives have been focused on non-traditional forms of energy, virtually ignoring one of the cleanest burning fuels that is plentiful and produced predominantly right here in America: propane. So why aren't we talking more about the use of propane as a viable bridge to a sustainable future?

Propane is a versatile, affordable, safe, abundantly-available energy source. Recognized for its low environmental impact in the Clean Air Act Amendments (CAAA), propane can offer immediate opportunities to reduce air pollution and carbon emissions over other fossil fuels. Even today, so many people equate propane solely as a popular source of heat to fire up their backyard barbecue grills. Yet, propane is already relied upon by millions in the United States to provide heat and energy for their homes, businesses, farms and fleets, among many other applications.

And, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the portable nature of propane has been called upon to provide vital temporary heat and power generation for so many of the makeshift testing tents, hospital sites, shelters and food distribution centers that have been erected in local communities throughout the nation.

Just a few interesting facts that may be surprising to those who are not among the more than 150,000 people employed in the propane industry nationwide:

- Switching to propane from heating oil reduces the carbon footprint by producing 38% fewer emissions with virtually no particulate matter.
- Currently, there are nearly 20,000 school buses across America powered by propane autogas. Propane exhaust creates 60-70% less smog producing hydrocarbons than gasoline and reduces greenhouse gas emissions by 15% compared to diesel vehicles.
- Propane evaporates immediately and therefore will not contaminate soil or ground water in the event of a release.

And yet, very few are advocating for propane as a positive contributor to the goal of lowering the carbon footprint. It's time for all of us to think bigger and with an "all of the above" strategy for achieving the aggressive carbon-reduction targets.

I have always been a strong advocate for innovation and change. Technology in the renewable energy space continues to advance, yet there are many applications that will take significantly more investment, and many more decades of innovation, to find a viable solution compared to current sources of energy. Chances are strong that at some point legislators will come to the realization that there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

In the meantime, it is incumbent on leaders in the propane industry to continue to advocate for the positive attributes of propane in the transition to a cleaner carbon future and to educate consumers and legislators alike. Along the way, there are new technologies being developed to produce traditional fossil-based propane from renewable sources, or to otherwise reduce the carbon intensity of this versatile energy source.

Climate change will continue to be one of the great challenges of our time. Propane can and will be a positive contributor in this fight for a long-term sustainable energy future.

Michael A. Stivala is president and CEO of Suburban Propane Partners, L.P., headquartered in Whippany, N.J.

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