Teaching for the future
SOTC offers new training to meet needs of industry for CNG vehicles

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An estimated 114,000 vehicles on American roadways are powered by compressed natural gas and soon Southern Oklahoma Technology Center students will be trained to work on those CNG vehicles in addition to gasoline-powered cars.

SOTC’s automotive service department trains students to meet the needs of the rapidly advancing auto market. With the recent push by companies to convert fleet to CNG and more automakers introducing CNG vehicles for consumers, school leaders decided it was time to begin a training program, says Scott Webb, instructor.

There is strong growth in the United States for CNG, says Webb. Depending on what research you look into it can vary the United States has at least a 100-year supply of natural gas. It is here to stay. Thanks to recent grant funding from the Oklahoma Lottery Commission, SOTC has a funding source for adding this training program to the automotive services department. This fall, the tech school purchased three vehicles that will eventually be worked on by students. Students who complete the program will have an understanding of how CNG vehicles operate and how to convert gasoline-powered vehicles to CNG, says Webb.

The Department of Energy reports CNG vehicles are a cheaper and environmentally friendly option for drivers. Vehicles that are powered by natural gas have lower emissions, about 20- to 30 percent less emissions than most other vehicles.

When it comes to costs, CNG drivers paid $1.66 per gge to fill up Wednesday at the public pumps located along Veterans Boulevard,
operated by ONG, according to CNGprices.com.

Tuesday, AAA reported the average price for a gallon of gasoline in Oklahoma at $2.54.

Webb views those reasons as the benefits for driving a CNG vehicle, but the advantage to teaching students how to work on CNG comes from the movement taking place by large companies like Chesapeake Energy. The oil and natural gas company, with headquarters in Oklahoma City, reports a goal to convert 100 percent of its fleet to CNG by 2015.

Fort Worth-based Range Resources, an oil and gas company, has 180 CNG vehicles in their 270-vehicle fleet, the company reports.

They are not alone with the push. At the state level, Gov. Mary Fallin is a proponent of CNG. Since being elected in 2010, she has encouraged the purchase of natural gas vehicles for the state's fleet. Last month it was reported Oklahoma state agencies had 543 CNG vehicles.

Despite the vigorous effort by the state government and businesses, little has been done to train Oklahomans to be able to service CNG vehicles and convert gasoline vehicles to CNG.

Webb says the only other state school with training on CNG is Oklahoma City Community College. SOTC is the first tech school in the state to introduce CNG into the automotive program.

The school has a 2014 Honda Civic CNG model and a 2015 F-250 - which is considered dual fuel with the option to run on either CNG or gasoline-- in the automotive shop. Additionally, a 2015 Chevrolet gasoline-powered pickup is parked nearby, which will be the vehicle students convert to running on CNG.

Before students can begin to work on the vehicles, some building improvements must be made to the shop for safety reasons. The school plans to meet the National Fire Protection Association standards for state CNG facilities before the first lesson can begin.

Webb says teaching safety practices about natural gas will be a big part of the program.

SOTC students are eager to get started, says Webb.

"The students find it pretty interesting," Webb says. "So many of them just want to start taking the vehicles apart, but we can't do that just yet." Students in the program will be trained to pass the state CNG certification tests, required before a mechanic can touch a CNG vehicle.

"This is a really good thing for our students," Webb says. "It all depends on what their interests are. For those that really take to this, they can go work at a dealer converting vehicles or work for a company with a large fleet of CNG vehicles."

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