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Next-gen gas trucks to tackle climate change?

Despite the setbacks with gas trucks – and particularly dual-fuel methane-diesel – revealed in last month’s report on the Low Carbon Truck Trial (page 34), this game must surely be far from over. Not only are next-generation OEM advances countering irksome efficiency losses and power limitations, but also aftermarket converters are hinting at solutions to crippling methane slip.

For transport operators worried about rising fuel prices, the clamour of voices railing against diesel and even green issues, that has to be good news. However, as ever, the devil is in the detail.

Yes, Iveco launched its Natural Power Stralis eight months ago, at last offering a workmanlike 400bhp and a 12-speed AMT, together delivering a claimed 5% fuel saving. And, yes, Scania’s introduction of something similar is said to be imminent. But with volumes low, prices will be high, so payback will be predicated on mileage.

Meanwhile, Europe is still waiting for Volvo’s long promised ‘revolutionary’ HPDI (high pressure, direct injection) dual-fuel gas engine – which, being compression-ignition, solves power ceiling issues at a stroke. But while experience with partner Westport in the US looks very encouraging, until a release date is forthcoming, nothing can be certain. And that includes the price and ROI.

Much the same applies to dual-fuel natural gas-diesel retrofits. Converters appear confident of developing methane slip-busting technologies, but best guess for availability is 2018. Only diesel-LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) Euro 6 conversions are currently viable. Up-front costs are low, bio-LPG is increasingly available and, while green returns may be modest, the fuel and NOx savings are undeniable.

So the future for natural gas may yet be bright, but it’s likely to be a slow burn. And it’s not just about products and prices. To kick start uptake, industry needs support for a solid biomethane infrastructure.

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