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Wait and see

It's an exciting time for alternative-fuel HGVs. New models, government pilot programmes and orders from early adopters are in the news for alternatives to diesel propulsion systems ranging from gas, range-extended hybrid, fuel cell, full electric and others (see feature, pp 27-28).

Let's challenge the hype surrounding them.

First, price premium: not only do they cost more to buy than diesel equivalents - the curse of new technologies produced in small volumes - but alternative powertrains require new infrastructure investments, too, such as filling stations, not to speak of new maintenance routines and skills. To justify these extra costs, operations would need to be not only less expensive but also less risky than diesel.

But gas trucks, for example, pose greater operational and economic risks than diesel ones because they are so new: Iveco and Scania gas tractor units may be for sale, but the number of right-hand-drive units operating in the UK is limited. Although the gas engine is tried and tested on municipal duty in milk floats and buses, vendors would need to demonstrate how prowling limited municipal routes is relevant to the needs of wider-ranging, higher power HGV work. And have the fuel-cell-powered and hybrid trucks put in enough road miles to prove that they can really go the distance, too?

Third, we've all heard that total cost of ownership calculations tip in favour of gas - methane works out less costly than diesel in the end. But can we be sure that we can see a long way down the road? Do we really know how fuel prices will behave over their operational lifetime, not to speak of trends in government duties imposed on them? (Increasing duty on gas while maintaining diesel duty could wreck gas's competitive advantage, for example.)

Finally, businesses may not gain from buying a fleet of low-emission gas trucks (discounting the environmental benefits of course) until they understand what local authorities will do. Will most towns and cities in Great Britain have banned older HGVs in five years' time?

We need new fuels with a reduced carbon footprint. But we also need business models that are sustainable in the long term. Whether transport companies can do both remains to be seen.

Will Dalrymple
Editor