

MATERIAL HANDLING WHOLESALER

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IMPCO kicks off their 50th anniversary with launch of new division

By Mary Glindinning

Rick Nielsen laughs heartily when told he sounds a lot like Hank Hill, the character on "King of the Hill" who sells propane and propane accessories. Except that Nielsen immediately adds compressed natural gas to the list of alternative fuels. Nielsen, general manager of IMPCO Technologies, sees cleaner gaseous fuels driving job creation, emissions reduction, cost savings and efficiency improvement, not just for forklifts but for automobiles.

IMPCO develops, manufactures and markets products that let internal combustion engines operate on less expensive fuels such as natural gas and propane. "There is no shortage of work here," he said. "With the 2010 release of our new propane injected fuel system for the industrial market and the US Automotive Divisional launch, 2009 will be as busy as 2008 was. We are a good news story here." He said engines using alternative fuels operate cleaner and are more durable and reliable, and that gaseous fuels are readily available and reduce dependence on foreign oil.

As part of its 50th anniversary celebration

in Santa Ana, California, IMPCO will launch its new North American Automotive Division. The timing is right, Nielsen said. "What we need to work on is infrastructure," alternative fuels refilling stations like gas pumps.

Its parent company, Fuel Systems Solutions, has been a major provider of alternative fuels systems worldwide that convert gasoline vehicles to run on cleaner burning natural gas or propane, increasing production to 800,000 conversions last year.

"Customers are looking for alternatives," Nielsen said. "And governments are requiring tailpipe emissions reductions. In addition to being good for the environment, alternative fuels can help stimulate the economy by creating jobs." Everything from forklifts to Zambonis runs on IMPCO's products. Its certified fuel systems for industrial forklift original equipment manufacturers are marketed under the brand name Spectrum. Mono-fuel or bi-fuel systems can be attached to any internal combustion engine.

"This industrial market is driven largely by the ease of refueling, indoor OSHA requirements and emission regulations enacted by CARB and EPA," Nielsen said.

Those regulations are regularly strengthened, and will become even more stringent, Nielsen said. "We are prepared to meet those aggressive regulation standards." There is a global commitment to cleaner air, he said. But it wasn't the green revolution that drove IMPCO's interest in alternative fuels.

The company entered the alternative fuels arena early. Fifty eight years ago, two entrepreneurs - Herbert Hills and Richard Baverstock - worked for a small company called Century that offered some alternative fuels components. They saw opportunity, started IMPCO - an acronym for Imperial Machine Products Company - and hired Dan Bass and Ak Miller, two race car drivers and enthusiasts. They tested and validated on Sunday, sold on Monday, is how Nielsen describes it. They recognized the inherent properties of propane could be used to enhance the performance of their cars, and they pushed the limits of alternative fuels, he said.

"Their legacy is why IMPCO today remains grounded in innovation, ingenuity and inspiration," Nielsen said. "IMPCO is committed to the future, as evidenced by our continued heavy investment in research and development." The company is headquartered in California but has offices throughout Asia, Europe, Australia and North America. When interviewed, Nielsen had just returned from Japan and Korea and was looking forward to his next business trip to Europe.