New ‘green’ product from Manchester Tank designed to put dent in disposable cylinder business

BY BRIAN RICHESON
Senior Editor

Frank Lane learned from his experience on propane’s front lines that an equipment void existed in the industry.

Working for the family propane company that his grandfather started in 1947 in south Alabama, Lane emptied disposable propane cylinders regularly while burning torches to solder water and refrigeration lines. The former Lane Butane Co. employee was frustrated by the wasteful and illogical concept of replacing the cylinder each time and sought to change the way users of small propane bottles maintained their fueling source.

“I was wanting to do something to have a refillable cylinder with a 12-year life instead of a disposable cylinder that gets one use and then recycled or thrown away,” Lane says.

Lane envisioned a product to replace the millions of 1-pound disposable propane cylinders that are used each year in the United States, the many that are discarded improperly and end up in landfills, as well as those that are refilled illegally.

About five years in the making – from the first sketches and valve design to its UL listing and manufacturing – Lane’s vision became a reality, and Manchester Tank’s 1-pound refillable propane cylinder debuted at last year’s NPGA Southeastern Convention & International Propane Expo in Atlanta.

“There was a lot of interest from folks who were really excited about it and thought it was neat, but they were wondering what they were going to do with it,” says Lane, director of research and development and quality control for Franklin, Tenn.-based Manchester Tank.

Versatile fueling source

The 1-pound refillable cylinder is designed to fit most appliances on the market, including all applications for which the disposable cylinders are used. Covering recreational, industrial, commercial and...
Continued from page 17

outdoor power equipment uses, the refillable cylinder connects to camping and portable cooking appliances, patio applications, forklift operations, plumbing and lawn care equipment.

It comes in two designs – the taller bottle measuring 15.5 inches high by 3 inches in diameter and the shorter, compact version at 11.125 inches high by 3.8 inches in diameter. Manchester Tank says run times are comparable to gasoline, with the cylinder fueling a 12,000-Btu application for about two hours.

“Both designs have a place in the market,” explains Gary Bozigar, product specialist for propane equipment distributor Bergquist Inc. “The taller version is for the four-stroke engine applications – anything that you convert from standard gasoline to propane. It’s primarily a complement to the direction landscapers are going with propane as

Continued on page 20

Propane Bottle Recycler on cleanup duty in national parks

Consumers of the 1-pound “disposable” propane cylinders have taken these products literally over the years. After fueling stoves, lanterns and heaters in the nation’s parks, the propane cylinders are often discarded, many ending up in landfills, returned to visitor centers or left in campgrounds.

During its push for the Propane Bottle Recycler (PBR) in 2005, Yellowstone National Park estimated that more than 3,000 used 1-pound propane cylinders were being discarded each year in the region and going into landfills. With the danger that some amount of propane remained in the bottles, the park sought someone to design and build a machine that would safely prepare these cylinders for recycling.

Enter Montana-based Brad Fimrite of Mountain States Environmental Services and Wayne Wilson of WWW Industries, who collaborated on the PBR and developed the first unit for Yellowstone. A host of partners, including AmeriGas and Worthington Cylinders, contributed about $50,000 in funding to the initial project.

“We were floored at what the need was out there,” says Fimrite, whose company disposes of hazardous waste and has worked with Yellowstone National Park, which spans Wyoming, Montana and Idaho.

According to information on the PBR website, an estimated 60 million 1-pound propane bottles are used annually in the United States, occupying about 5 million cubic feet of landfill space. Yellowstone now has propane cylinder recycling bins throughout the park, and visitors are complying with the program. Last year Yellowstone collected and processed more than 35,000 1-pound cylinders using the PBR, says Jim Evanoff, the park’s environmental protection specialist.

The PBR punctures the bottles and flattens them into scrap metal. The base of the trailer can hold about 3,000 empty processed bottles for hauling to a scrap steel yard. During the recycling process, the PBR recovers from the bottles any remaining propane, which is used to power its generator. The PBR, also available in a stationary design, can handle all sizes and types of propane bottles – it can be custom built to meet customer needs – and is capable of processing an estimated 1,000 cylinders per day.

PBRs are currently in operation in Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah, Yosemite National Park in California and Yellowstone; and by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Ministry of Natural Resources Fire Management Headquarters in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada.

“It’s taking off and getting a life of its own,” Fimrite says. “Hopefully someday we’ll sell the manufacturing rights to the patent to someone who has more horsepower to start a factory and implement it across the whole U.S.”

Visit www.propanebottlerecycler.org for more information about the equipment and the recycling process.
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Continued from page 18

an alternative fuel. The smaller version is used more in camping applications.”

Bozigar says response to the product has been positive, though he notes it hasn’t been on the market for a full year and is still gathering momentum — “It’s a new product that just has to get out there some more,” he says. Manchester Tank and its parent company, McWane Inc., would not disclose sales figures.

Scott Fleetwood, plant manager for Tri-Gas Distributing Co. in Benzonia, Mich., thought the 1-pound refillable cylinder was the “hottest item at the merchandise show last year.” Fleetwood recalls a similar product on the market about 25 years ago.

“I figured the reason they took those off the market was because everybody was taking the refill adapter and filling the disposable cylinders,” Fleetwood says. “I get a lot of people still doing it, and of course I tell them it’s illegal. I even caught a guy at the fairgrounds this year selling an adapter for them.”

While the Internet is full of products, instructions and personal accounts to help end users refill disposable cylinders – a practice NFPA 58 forbids – Manchester Tank’s filling nozzle has been designed so that it cannot connect to a disposable cylinder.

That’s one of several noted safety features on the new product, which also contains a positive shutoff valve, allowing the user to stop gas flow in case of a leak; a relief valve, pointed in a safe direction; and a fixed maximum liquid level gauge. The cylinder also was designed for extreme durability.

“With this you have all of the features of a standard grill cylinder,” says Lane, later adding that the refillable cylinder was his “chance to do something for the environment.”

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**Knowing the numbers**

The 1-pound cylinders come 20 per case for marketers, and the product, which retails for about $30 to $40, pays for itself with 16 hours of use, Manchester Tank says. Fleetwood bought a case shortly after last April’s Midwest Propane Gas Convention & Trade Show in Indianapolis and had sold eight as of December.

“They’re sitting right here on the counter. A lot of people know about them; they just haven’t brought themselves to pay 36 bucks for one,” he says. “I do expect a lot of people to come back and buy a couple. Of course, I think they... Continued on page 22
Updates to Dispensing Propane Safely

Dispensing Propane Safely is an employee training program funded by the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC) that details the many tasks associated with the safe and effective dispensing of propane into several types of propane cylinders and tanks, including those found at retail locations, bulk plant and forklift operations.

Propane autogas dispensing operations as well as emerging propane technologies, such as refillable 1-pound propane cylinders, are also highlighted. The new program includes updates and expands on information presented in the previous program and is organized into modules that allow you to select what the user needs to learn based on their job responsibilities.

The first five modules in the program apply to anyone dispensing propane and cover:

- Introduction to dispensing propane safely
- Properties and characteristics of propane
- Dispensing station equipment
- DOT cylinders
- Inspecting, filling and labeling small cylinders

Additional modules that can be selected based on job requirements include:

- Refueling, maintaining and troubleshooting forklift cylinders
- Refueling ASME motor fuel and RV tanks
- Emerging technologies

As well as retail cylinder exchange operations

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Continued from page 20

need to buy two so they have one for a spare.”

Fleetwood expects the refillables to be popular among the many ice fishermen in Tri-Gas’ northwest Michigan region, to heat and light their shanties. The plant manager is also a heavy user of the small propane bottles – for lanterns, heaters and torches – and says the refillable cylinder makes sense for him.

“There really is quite a few uses, but I do think you have to be an outdoorsman and sportsman to make it really worth your while,” he says.

Mark Holloway, president of Modern Gas in Albany, Ga., also bought a pack of 20 1-pound refillable cylinders and had sold half of them as of December. He hopes such a product would motivate manufacturers to design lawn and landscape equipment to run specifically on propane.

“I was more excited about it from the lawn and landscape side,” he says. “It felt like if somebody came out with this it wouldn’t be long before the manufacturers would come out with the equipment to go with it.”

Marketers can purchase a filling kit for the 1-pound refillable cylinders, with two types of dispensers: a 33.5-pound forklift cylinder type filler and a 420-pound cylinder type filler. End users may have their cylinders refilled only by a certified propane dealer or someone trained in the transfer of LP gas – much like the refilling process for 20-pound grill cylinders.

Instructions for filling the 1-pound cylinders are included in the Propane Education & Research Council’s (PERC) updated Dispensing Propane Safely training program (see sidebar, page 21). LP6