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YOUR GUIDE TO PROPANE SUPPLY

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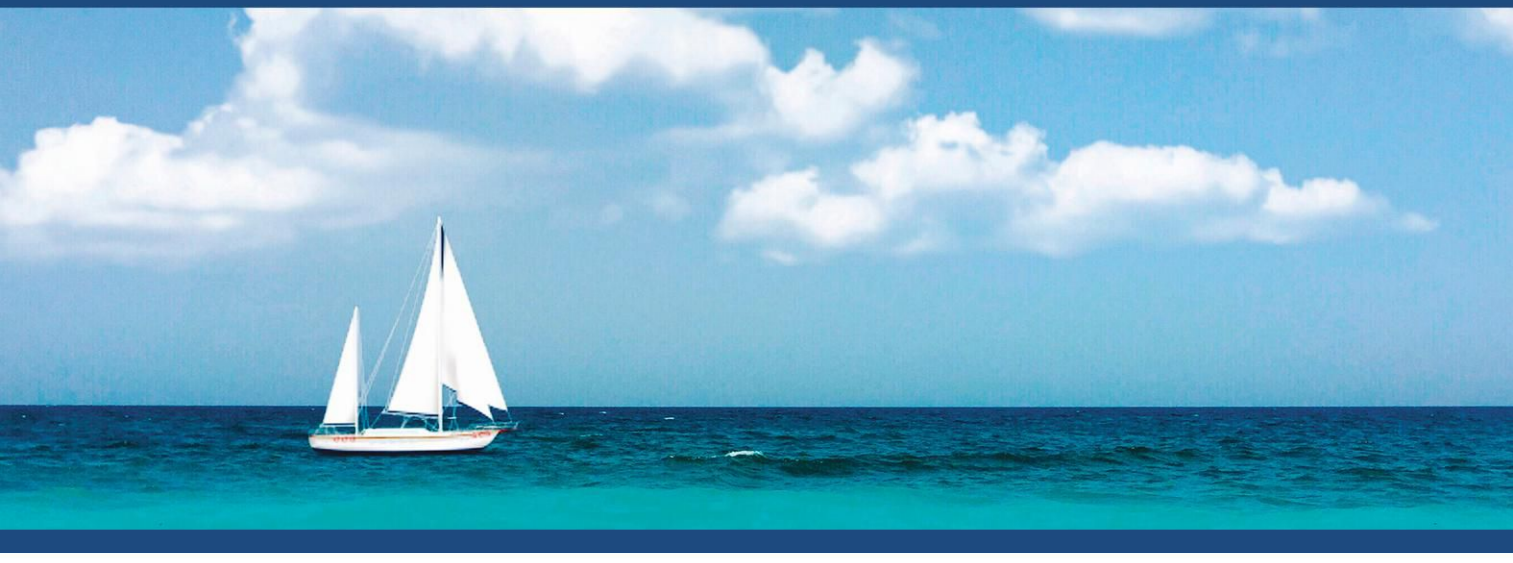
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BUTANE-PROPANE NEWS
BPN
SEPTEMBER 2025



YOUR GUIDE TO PROPANE SUPPLY IN 2025

Navigating the uncertainties of tariffs & world conflicts through strategic supply planning & risk management

+ SPECIAL SECTION: THE LATEST IN PROPANE CYLINDERS

Bergquist's Mike Vigliotti Is Fighting ALS One Day at a Time

Propane Emergencies: Essential, Proactive Steps That Can Protect Your People

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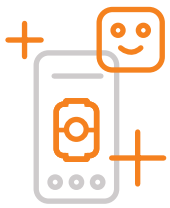
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Dear Readers,

Artificial intelligence, or AI, seems to be everywhere these days. Whether your company is exploring how AI automations can improve efficiencies in the workplace or you're perusing a social media feed, AI has undoubtedly become a part of our lives — whether we want it to or not. In fact, it's become so prevalent that society seems to have moved beyond the "I can't tell this is AI" stage to the "I think everything is AI" stage. Both are detrimental to our media literacy and how we process the world.

While AI can improve efficiencies and business practices in several use cases, it can never truly replicate the expertise and humanity of actual people. At BPN, we have adopted an AI policy from our parent company to help ensure the content you receive through our magazine is created by humans — those with the knowledge and expertise to lead you on the right path and with human experiences that inform how they approach potential challenges both in business and in the regulatory and legislative sectors.

We're committed to vetting editorial contributions, and in cases where AI may have been used to assist in content or artwork, we will include an editor's note to let you know the extent to which it was used. We believe in setting clear boundaries and standards for human-generated content in our magazine and will uphold those to the best of our abilities to prioritize real voices with accurate information for your benefit and your safety. If you'd like to talk more about AI in publishing, I'd love to chat. You can reach me at jphillips@cahabamedia.com. You can also read our full AI policy at bpnews.com/editorial.

In other news, this issue includes important updates on propane supply as we head into the fall and winter seasons. The hot topics right now are tariffs and world conflicts — specifically, how will these uncertainties and fluctuations affect prices and the movement of supply? Starting on page 28, Pat Thornton interviews several supply experts on what may be possible to predict for winter 2025-2026 and where strategic planning can help mitigate the more unpredictable aspects of the issue. And on page 32, don't miss advice from J.D. Buss of Westlark Advisors on how to use curiosity, flexibility and readiness to develop an intentional plan for propane purchasing — another way to prepare ahead of the busy season.

Before I go, I also want to give a huge congratulations to BPN's Christina Miller, who was recently promoted to managing editor! She has been an essential part of our team since she started in December 2023, and I'm proud of her commitment to learn more about this industry every day. To connect with Christina, you can reach her at cmiller@cahabamedia.com.

Until next time,

Jessica L. Phillips

JESSICA GRAHAM PHILLIPS
Editor-in-Chief

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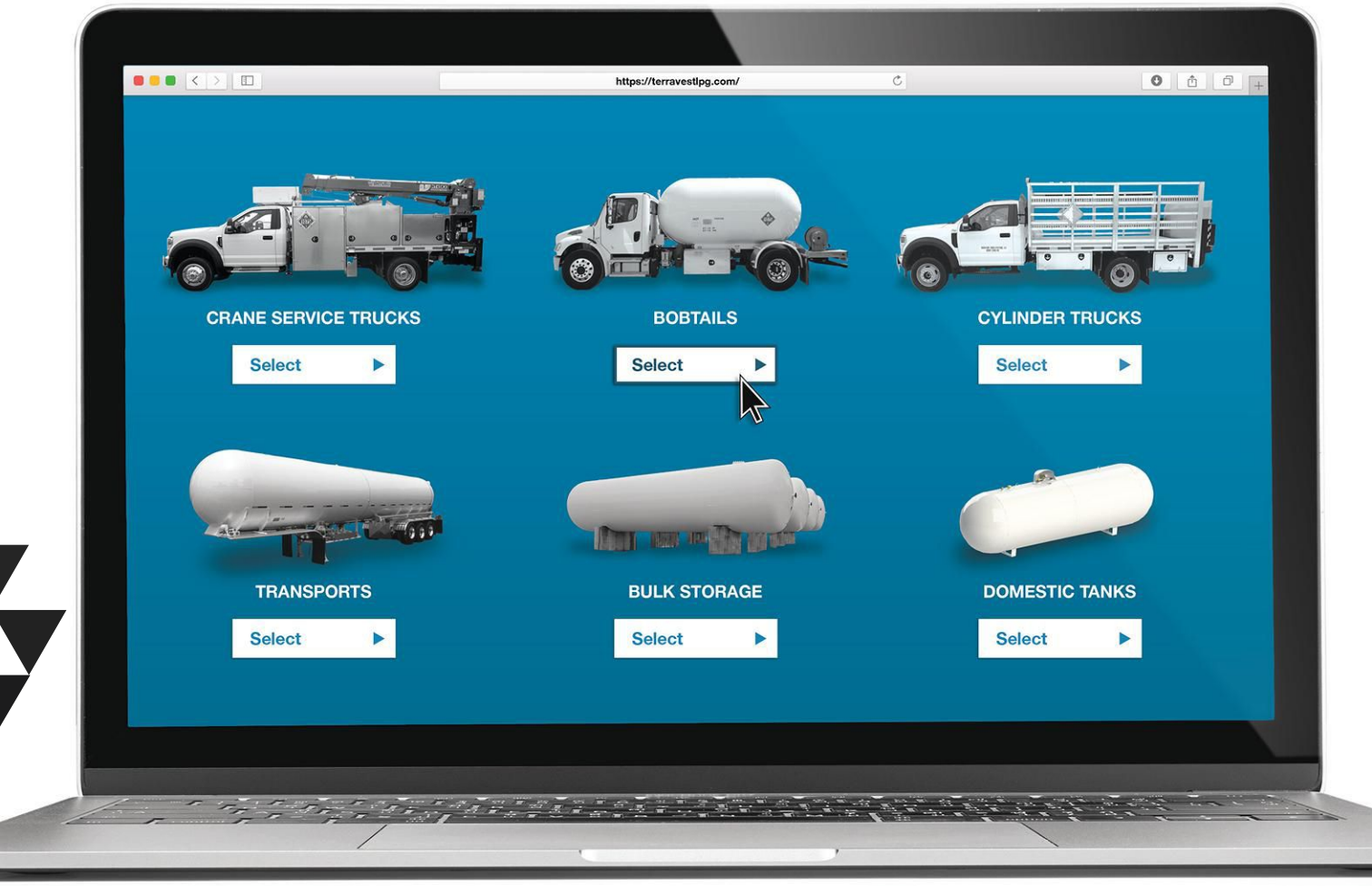
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On the Cover
Propane supply uncertainties can be mitigated with careful planning and strategic management.
(Image: Adobe Stock)

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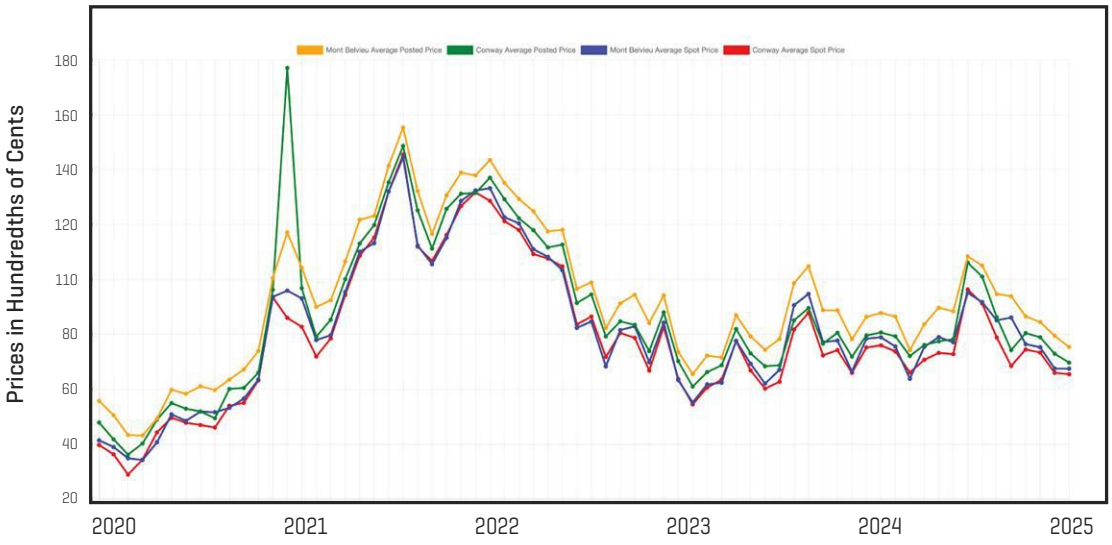
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MONT BELVIEU & CONWAY AVERAGE THURSDAY PROPANE PRICES



at a glance During the latest mid-month period, prices at Mont Belvieu, Texas, were mixed. The posted prices decreased 4.083 cents/gal, from July mid-month to August mid-month, and spot prices increased 0.375 cents. Conway, Kansas, postings decreased 3.257 cents/gal and spots decreased 0.25 cents over the month.

MID-WEEK AVERAGE POSTED/SPOT PROPANE PRICES (Cents per Gallon)

	7/17/25	7/24/25	7/31/25	8/7/25	8/14/25
Mont Belvieu					
posted	79.480	78.147	81.647	77.230	75.397
spot	66.875 – 68.250	70.375 – 70.500	72.000 – 72.750	65.750 – 66.125	67.250 – 67.750
Conway					
posted	72.960	72.293	74.543	72.377	69.703
spot	65.250 – 66.750	67.250 – 68.250	68.500 – 69.000	65.375 – 65.750	65.000 – 66.000

at a glance

Canada's primary underground propane inventories increased by 17.5% in July, according to the Canada Energy Regulator (CER). The total represented a month-to-month increase of 135.8 Mcm. Compared to a year earlier, stocks were lower, with 326.3 Mcm, or 26.3%, less product on hand. *(Editor's Note: Due to BPN's printing schedule, July inventory data is the latest available from the CER.)*

CANADIAN INVENTORIES (Thousand Cubic Meters)

PROPANE	July 2025	June 2025	Change	July 2024
Propane-East	290.5	219.5	32.4%	270.9
Propane-West	622.4	557.6	11.6%	968.3
Total Propane	912.9	777.1	17.5%	1239.2
BUTANE				
Butane-East	448.8	340.9	31.7%	336.2
Butane-West	641.5	573.7	11.8%	556.7
Total Butane	1090.2	914.6	19.2%	892.9

Source: Canada Energy Regulator

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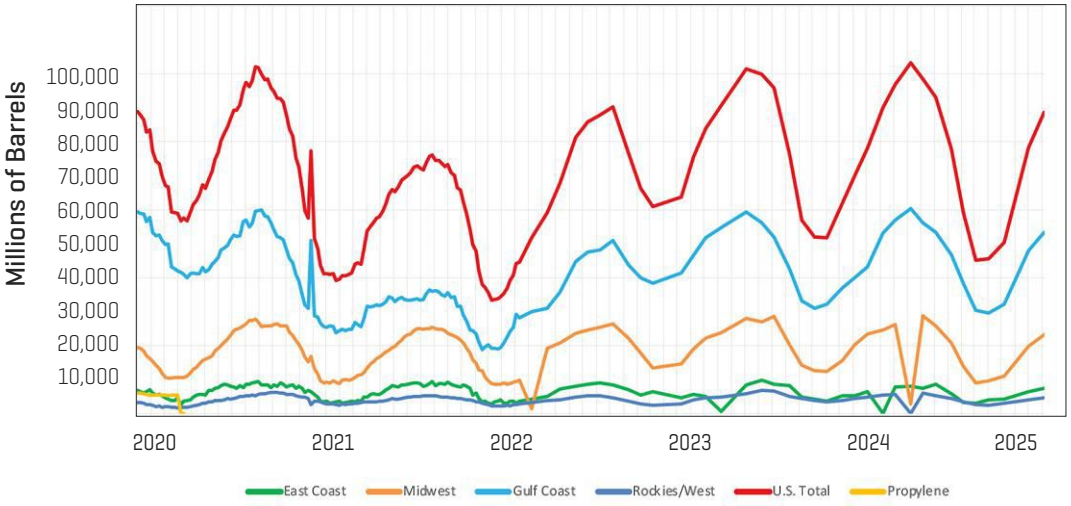
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U.S. PROPANE INVENTORIES



at a glance

United States propane stocks experienced a 5.763 MMbbl increase from July to August. East Coast stocks decreased 13,000 bbl, the Midwest increased 2.107 MMbbl, the Gulf Coast increased 3.508 MMbbl, and the Rocky Mountain/West Coast increased 276,000 bbl. Compared to the same time in August 2024, the August 2025 stocks were 2.734 MMbbl lower.

U.S. PROPANE INVENTORIES

July 11 – Aug. 8, 2025, and One Year Ago (Thousand Barrels)

	7/11/25	7/18/25	7/25/25	8/1/25	8/8/25	8/9/24
East Coast	7.658	6.017	6.579	6.965	7.528	6.800
Midwest	21.064	21.552	22.035	22.747	23.171	24.651
Gulf Coast	49.795	50.554	50.285	50.462	53.303	53.208
Rocky Mtn & West Coast	4.333	4.204	4.577	4.565	4.609	5.423
U.S.	82.849	82.327	83.477	84.739	88.612	90.082

Find out more:
For commentary on mid-month prices and Canadian inventories, see page 10 or visit bpnews.com/news.

Editor's Note: The Energy Information Administration (EIA) will no longer be reporting monthly residential prices from April through September. Publication of this data will resume on the EIA website in October on a weekly basis and will resume on this page in our November 2025 issue.

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NCPERF & SEPATEC LAUNCH STATEWIDE CSR TRAINING

In a step to support North Carolina's propane companies, the North Carolina Propane Education & Research Foundation (NCPERF), in partnership with the Southeast Propane Alliance Technical Education Center (SEPATEC), hosted a statewide customer service representative (CSR) training series from July 15–18. Susan Janett, director of training at Warm Thoughts Communications, led the initiative, bringing her nationally recognized expertise to four cities across North Carolina: Greenville, Raleigh, Graham and Asheville. Each day featured two hands-on training sessions, equipping front-line personnel with the tools to deliver exceptional customer experiences, strengthen client relationships and improve operational efficiency. The training sessions saw high participation from companies throughout the state, with a total of 66 CSR professionals trained during the four-day series. "We designed this initiative to ensure every customer interaction adds value and builds loyalty," said Janett. "Customer service is the heartbeat of every propane company. It's about creating trust, solving problems quickly and making customers feel heard — whether they're calling with a question or facing an urgent need." This training series was part of NCPERF's 2025 initiative to improve workforce skills and promote consistent, high-quality service across North Carolina's propane industry. By offering CSR training in multiple regions, both in-person and online, SEPATEC ensured accessibility for companies of all sizes and locations.

MADERIA GROUP & L4 GROUP MERGE TO FORM NAVARA MARKETING

The marketing firms Maderia Group and L4 Group have merged to form Navara Marketing. The two firms joined forces to create a growth-focused agency designed to help fuel dealers, HVAC contractors and service-based businesses grow smarter and faster. After nearly a decade of collaboration, the merger formalizes what many clients were already experiencing: two teams working as one. "Navara was created because … energy companies … need a partner who understands their pressure points (seasonality, margin compression, digital demand) and has the firepower to do something about it," said Andrew Maderia, cofounder of Navara. "This merger gives us the structure to go deeper on what matters most in digital: search visibility, lead quality and speed to execution," added Brett Lewis, cofounder of Navara. "Whether it's organic rankings or paid performance, our clients need strategies that evolve as fast as Google and AI do. Navara was built to stay ahead of that curve, so our clients don't have to."

ISLAND ENERGY INC. ANNOUNCES NEW GENERAL MANAGER



Wes Wilkerson

Island Energy Inc. has announced the promotion of Wes Wilkerson to general manager. Wilkerson, a native of Greene County, Arkansas, has been with Island Energy for five years, previously serving as business development manager. Wilkerson holds a bachelor's degree in business management from Arkansas State University and has over 25 years of experience in the propane gas industry. He is widely recognized for his comprehensive knowledge of the sector. Founded in 2008, locally owned Island Energy Inc. has emerged as a fast-growing propane gas marketer in the northeast Arkansas region. The company is committed to providing safe and friendly service, with a strong emphasis on customer satisfaction. Headquartered in Paragould, Arkansas, Island Energy serves nine counties throughout the region.

MID-MONTH UPDATE: MID-AUGUST PRICES DOWN FROM JULY

During the latest mid-month period, prices at Mont Belvieu, Texas, decreased. The posted prices decreased 4.083 cents/gal, from July mid-month to August mid-month, while the spot prices decreased 1 cent. Conway, Kansas, postings decreased 3.257 cents/gal, and spots decreased 0.25 cents over the month. The Mont Belvieu mid-July posted price was 79.48 cents/gal. The next week the price decreased 1.333 cents to 78.147 cents, followed by a 3.5-cent increase to 81.647 cents. Prices then decreased 4.417 cents to 77.23 cents the first week of August. At mid-month, postings increased by 1.833 cents to 75.397 cents/gal. Compared to the same time in August 2024, the August 2025 prices were 11.083 cents lower. The Conway mid-July posted price was 72.96 cents/gal. The next week the price decreased 0.667 cents to 72.293 cents, followed by a 2.25-cent increase to 74.53 cents/gal. Prices then decreased 2.153 cents to 72.377 cents the first week of August. At mid-month, postings decreased 2.674 cents to 69.703 cents/gal. Compared to the same time in August 2024, the August 2025 prices were 9.573 cents lower. Mont Belvieu spots opened mid-July at 68.25 cents/gal. The next week the price increased by 2.125 cents to 70.375 cents, followed by a 1.625-cent increase to 72 cents the next week. Prices then decreased 6.25 cent to 65.75 cents/gal the first week of August. At mid-month, they increased 1.5 cents to 67.25 cents/gal. Compared to the same time in August 2024, the August 2025 prices were 7.5 cents lower. Conway spots opened mid-July at 65.25 cents/gal. The next week the price increased by 2 cents to 67.25 cents, followed by a 1.25-cent increase to 68.5 cents the next week. Prices then decreased 3.125 cents to 65.375 cents/gal the first week of August. At mid-month, they decreased 0.375 cents to 65 cents/gal. Compared to the same time in August 2024, the August 2025 prices were 8.5 cents lower.

THERMOTANE PROPANE ACQUIRES MATCHETT & SON LP GAS

Thermotane Propane has acquired Matchett & Son LP Gas, a propane provider based in Interlachen, Florida. This was a privately arranged, owner-to-owner deal. With this acquisition, Thermotane Propane now operates three locations, with more on the way. "We are proud to welcome Matchett & Son LP Gas into the Thermotane family," said Chandler Robertson, president of Thermotane. "This move supports our mission of delivering lower propane prices

and exceptional service." This marks only the second acquisition in Thermotane's 77-year history and aligns closely with the company's long-term growth strategy. Launched in 2023, their "Five Locations in Five Years" initiative set out to expand, and preserve, the company's brand. With a fourth location in permitting and a fifth underway, Thermotane is currently ahead of schedule. This acquisition represents a meaningful step in Thermotane's evolution, made possible by the dedication of its team and partners. The company remains focused on building a stronger, more responsive future.

FEI INC. HIRES NEW SALES TEAM MEMBER


Craig Roeseler

Craig Roeseler has joined the FEI Inc. Energy Division sales team, covering the Wisconsin and Illinois regions. Roeseler brings with him more than a decade of hands-on experience from the propane industry, including inventory management, customer involvement and training. As a result, he knows firsthand the value of timely response, dependable products and being available to his customers. Matt Klabo, FEI's vice president of sales, is excited about the addition of Roeseler to the FEI sales team: "As a former FEI customer, Craig not only has firsthand knowledge of the products we sell, but also of the consumer needs in the area. His operational experience adds another dimension to the services he will be able to assist with."

AMERICAN WELDING & GAS ACQUIRES FIRST CALL PROPANE

Legacy Energy Consulting, a merger and acquisitions consulting firm, has announced the successful sale of First Call Propane to American Welding & Gas (AWG). Dale and Kelari, owners of First Call Propane, commented, "When we made the choice to retire, we had three goals: to pass our business on to a company with the same values we worked so many years to exemplify, to find a company that would promote and value our employees, and to find a company that would give our customers the same great pricing and customer service they expect." Chad Pendill, founder and president of Legacy Energy Consulting, commented, "Dale and Kelari have developed a highly successful business and positioned themselves as a prominent propane provider in the Roosevelt, Utah, market." Legacy Energy Consulting managed the acquisition. The transaction marked the second acquisition deal for the company in 2025.

LAKES GAS REOPENS BAUDETTE, MINNESOTA, OFFICE AFTER NEARLY A DECADE

Lakes Gas has announced the reopening of its Baudette, Minnesota, office, which had been closed for nearly a decade. As a provider of propane services across the Upper Midwest, this reopening signifies Lakes Gas' commitment to serving the community of Baudette and the surrounding Lake of the Woods area. This office is the 58th staffed Lakes Gas location. The newly renovated office, located in the heart of Baudette, is now fully operational and ready to serve both residential and commercial customers. The reopening is part of a broader company initiative to reinvest in the small, rural communities that are vital to its heritage and operations, and contributes to Lakes Gas' ongoing dedication to support the people and economies of the rural Midwest. The Lakes Gas Baudette office plans to host a grand reopening this upcoming spring.

BLUE PEAK RESOURCES HIRES CHARLIE BROWN AS LATEST TEAM MEMBER

Charlie Brown has joined Blue Peak Resources, a merger and acquisitions consulting firm, as its latest team member. Brown is a highly accomplished business and sales executive renowned for his expertise in strategic planning, market expansion and driving profitability. With almost 50 years of experience in the propane industry, he began his career in 1976 and has held various leadership roles with top companies, including Norgas, Buckeye Gas Products, Ferrellgas and Rutherford Equipment. At Ferrellgas, Brown advanced from district manager to division manager to territory account manager, successfully implementing key growth and retention initiatives. His contributions in strategic planning, contract negotiation and team building during major acquisitions have set him apart in the industry. Throughout his nearly five-decade journey in the propane sector, Brown has remained deeply committed to two essential principles: 1.) building lasting relationships; and 2.) delivering exceptional value.

CANADIAN INVENTORIES INCREASED FROM JUNE TO JULY

Canada's primary underground propane inventories increased by 17.5% back in July, according to the Canada Energy Regulator. The July Canadian propane inventories stood at 912.9 Mcm. The total represented a month-to-month increase of 135.8 Mcm. Compared to a year earlier, stocks were lower, with 326.3 Mcm, or 26.3%, less product on hand. Propane storages in the West started July a bit higher at 622.4 Mcm, which corresponds to 3.921 MMbbl, the agency reported. From June to July, volumes increased by 64.8 Mcm, or 11.6%, and were 345.9 Mcm less the year prior's level of 968.3 Mcm. Propane storages in the East started July higher at 290.5 Mcm, commensurate with 1.83 MMbbl. This gain put propane 71 Mcm, or 32.3%, higher for the month, with an increase of 19.6 Mcm, or 7.2% above a year earlier. Canadian butane inventories stood at 1090.2 Mcm at the beginning of July, for an increase of 175.6 Mcm, or 19.2%, from June. Unlike propane, the year-over-year comparison finds butane volumes to be higher than the prior year's total, with inventories 197.3 Mcm, or 22.1%, above 2024. Western butane supplies, at 641.5 Mcm, were higher by 67.8 Mcm, or 11.8%, from the previous month and were 84.8 Mcm, or 15.2%, more than last year. Eastern butane, at 448.8 Mcm, was 107.9 Mcm, or 31.7%, higher month over month, and totaled 112.6 Mcm, or 33.5%, above a year earlier.

Industry Calendar

Sept. 15-17 NPGA Fall Technology, Standards & Safety Committee Meeting
npga.org
Pittsburgh, PA

Sept. 16-17 South Dakota PGA Annual Convention
sdp2ma.com
Deadwood, SD

Sept. 16-18 Arizona PGA Annual Meeting
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Mesa, AZ

Sept. 18-19 Benchmarking Fall Meeting
npga.org
Providence, RI

Sept. 21 Southeast Propane Alliance Fall Meeting
southeastpropane.org
Atlanta, GA

Sept. 23-24 Nebraska PGA/Petroleum Convention
nebraskapropane.com
Omaha, NE

Sept. 23-25 Tennessee PGA Safety Summit
tngas.org
Murfreesboro, TN

Sept. 25 Nevada Propane Dealers Association Conference
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Reno, NV

Sept. 30-Oct. 1 PERC Fall Advisory Committee Meeting
propane.com
Tampa, FL

Oct. 5-7 Virginia PGA Fall Meeting
vapga.org
Hot Springs, VA

Oct. 7 National Propane Day

Oct. 8-9 Michigan PGA Board of Directors Meeting
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Oct. 9 Pennsylvania PGA Fall Meeting
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THE FUELING STATION

In early August, the Western Propane Gas Association (WPGA) and Pacific Propane Gas Association (PPGA) cohosted their annual summer conference meeting. This year's event was held in sunny Santa Rosa, California.

To kick off the event, participants met in the Flamingo Resort for a welcome reception, where attendees mingled alongside live music. Throughout the conference, propane members socialized and networked at meetings and dinners. Members also attended discussions to best position the region's propane community for success in light of local state regulations and a shifting political landscape.

















“They’ve been great with me and great with our employees.”

- Tom Sigler
Owner, Eastern Sierra Propane

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Nancy Coop is an industry advocate. She is a director at the M&A advisory firm Cetane Associates. Contact Coop at ncoop@cetane.com. Visit cetane.com.

IF YOU COULD ONLY EAT THE CUISINE OF 1 COUNTRY FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, WHICH WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Propane professionals weigh in with their favorite global cuisines & the stories behind their flavorful picks

Would you happily choose one culture's food traditions over all others? For the rest of your life? Some of our colleagues seem almost enthusiastic about the prospect.

In this column, adopted from the familiar "Heard on the Street" format, we offer our responders a chance to answer the question posed in the title. These are their replies, reported verbatim.

A GLOBAL FEAST

I would choose Spain, and here's why. It's my impression that Spain's location on the Mediterranean Sea has brought the influence of other countries' food traditions and resulted in the tremendous variety of foods that have become a part of Spanish cuisine. In addition, I really enjoy the experience of sharing tapas (small plates of appetizer portions) instead of choosing an entree for dinner. Dining is very social in Spain, and I love the idea of gathering with family and friends to enjoy a wide assortment of delicious foods and lively conversation. And thinking about this has made me very hungry!

JOSH SIMPSON
LITTLE KAMPER LP
MANTECA, CALIFORNIA

It would have to be the Italian cuisine for me. I've always been a fan of Italian sauces and the variety of dishes that encompass both meat and fish. And I would typically order Italian sausage before even Polish kielbasa (apologies, family). I know I'll be satisfied when I sit down to anything Italian. The 'icing on the cake' comes in the form of tiramisu!

BRUCE SWIECICKI
CONSULTING ENGINEER
TINLEY PARK, ILLINOIS

Mexican food. My first husband was Mexican, and I learned to love many of the traditional dishes. For our wedding dinner, birria (goat head) was served. The women from his family taught me to prepare many dishes from scratch — frijoles, carnitas, pozole, chorizo con huevos, to name a few, and tamales being the most time-consuming. Tacos with rice and beans are still on the menu at least once a week. So quick and easy for a weeknight dinner. I also appreciate the fresh ingredients, flavors and the love in which each dish is prepared. Cooking is my love language. Salud!

JULIE JOHNSON
TED JOHNSON PROPANE
BALDWIN PARK, CALIFORNIA

I have always enjoyed casseroles, which normally combines vegetables, a protein, sauce and some kind of starch. Chinese or Asian cooking often follows that same idea, so I would probably say Asian cuisine. There are so many dishes that include many different vegetables; have your choice of meats with different sauces and then have it over noodles or rice. I think that covers all the bases. I love the variety that this cuisine provides. Truth be told, I like my Chinese buffets, but my wife is not a fan, so I partake when I am on the road. I even go so far



sometimes to schedule appointments around some of my favorite stops (Fishkill exit on I-84). The bonus is the positive message you get from the fortune cookie, so you even leave in a good frame of mind!

TOM KRUPA
NGL SUPPLY TERMINALS CO.
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

I'm going to cheat and say Middle Eastern and Greek because I love gyros, shawarma, falafels and kebabs.

SAM FUNG
EMERSON FISHER LP GAS
MCKINNEY, TEXAS

Mexican food, no question. I already eat it most days, so this would be easy for me. There is so much variety, and the flavors always hit just right. I love spicy food, and one of the best things about Mexican cuisine is how easy it is to turn up the heat or tone it down depending on your mood. I am also a big fan of queso and sour cream, which somehow manage to make everything even better. Plus, it's great for meal prep. I can make a batch of seasoned meat with veggies and rice and have easy, satisfying lunches ready to go. It is flexible, flavorful and never boring.

STACI RAMMEL
WOODRUFF ENERGY
BRIDGETON, NEW JERSEY

Over the years I have had the pleasure to enjoy food all around the world. I enjoy local cuisine that I cannot get at home. If I had only one to choose, it would likely be Italian food. The traditional flavors represent the culture of a passionate people. The sauces and fresh pasta are amazing. I also enjoy pairing wine with the food, and Italian cuisine does that well. Growing up in Boston, we had some of the best Italian restaurants in the country. Many of my friends were Italian, and their families knew how to cook and make food part of everyday life.

ED VARNEY
TOPLINE MANAGEMENT
MCKINNEY, TEXAS

What cuisine would I eat? The choice was between two — British pub food, which some might argue is not a 'cuisine,' and Indian. Since choosing Indian sounds more sophisticated, I'm going with that one. Why? The many flavors, the multitude of vegetarian options and NA'AN BREAD. I love na'an bread. And though I do eat chicken and fish, these are incorporated into some of the dishes, so I would not be forced to eat vegetables night and day. Plus, I would never eat a cow.

LESLIE WOODWARD
FAIRVIEW FITTINGS
OAKVILLE, ONTARIO, CANADA

My choice is Italian because there are so many authentic and delicious Italian dishes to choose from. It all starts with margherita pizza, my Friday night go-to meal. The list is extensive: bolognese sauce, lasagna, gnocchi, parmigiana, bruschetta, carbonara, polenta, fettuccine alfredo, risotto, minestrone soup, and one of my all-time favorites,

osso buco. Italian food is a comfort food readily available, reasonably priced and goes well with wine. Add in the special side dishes, salads and desserts like tiramisu, gelato, cannoli, ricotta cake, zeppole and biscotti, you can see why it's more of an experience than a meal. Delizioso, squisito, ottimo! (Delicious, exquisite, the best!)

JERRY SCHIMMEL
P3 PROPANE SAFETY
CUMBERLAND, RHODE ISLAND

Mexican! Love it and could eat it every day. You might say I like a little spice in my life. Of course, in Oklahoma and Texas, we mostly have TexMex, which I enjoy as well as the true Mexican food that involves more seafood. Now I'm craving a good margarita with some chips and salsa!

PAULA MOORE
BLACKBURN PROPANE SERVICE INC.
DURANT, OKLAHOMA

Since I do not eat meat, this is a very hard question to answer. I am glad there are many choices to choose from, as it is not easy to be limited to just one country.

RICHARD STRYCHARZ JR.
WALTER'S PROPANE
SUNDERLAND, MASSACHUSETTS

If I had to choose one country's cuisine for the rest of my life, it would be Italian — because, let's be honest, gelato! From fresh pastas and crusty breads to savory meats, cheeses and seafood — every bite is a feast. Just thinking about it makes me hungry and reminds me of so many special memories gathered around the table.

LAUREN CLARK
BERQUIST INC.
TOLEDO, OHIO

LET'S EAT!

No doubt, Italian and Mexican are the most popular among this group, with strong support for Spanish and Asian and further mentions for Middle Eastern, Greek and British pub food. The basic appreciation and enjoyment of well-prepared meals is a distinctive feature of our colleagues' descriptions of meals they enjoy.

At my house, my husband does the cooking these days. He's an adventurous chef and is continually on the lookout for delicious new recipes. My reliable request, when asked, is for Mediterranean dishes. But the bottom line is we eat joyfully and heartily whatever the cook prepares, and dinner time is "when it's ready." It's a happy arrangement!

If you are interested in submitting responses, please contact Coop at ncoop@cetane.com.

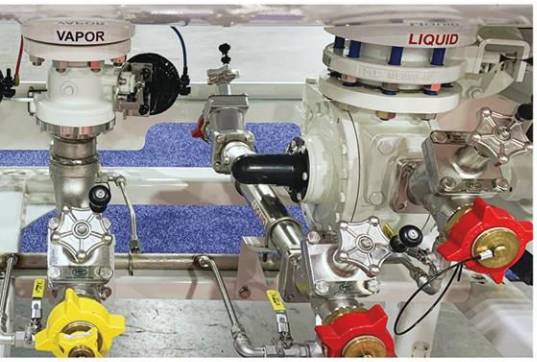


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David Schlee is an attorney practicing in Kansas City, Missouri. He has been representing propane and natural gas distributors in fire and explosion litigation since 1986, and has authored BPN's Propane & the Law column since September 1989. He can be reached at dschlee@dschleelaw.com.

VIRGINIA JURY CONVICTS PROPANE SERVICE MANAGER OF MANSLAUGHTER

How mismanagement of a leaking propane tank led to the death of a firefighter — & a guilty verdict

In an unprecedented case that is very likely to send shock waves through the propane industry, a Loudoun County, Virginia, jury has found a propane service manager guilty of involuntary manslaughter. The verdict came down on July 21, after a two-week trial. The prosecution arose from the tragic 2024 propane explosion that killed a volunteer firefighter and injured 11 others in Sterling, Virginia. (See this column in the December 2024 issue of BPN magazine).

The following account is based on multiple news reports of the incident and trial, as well as a 37-page civil complaint filed by multiple plaintiffs against Southern States Cooperative and others arising from the incident.

UNDERGROUND TANK

The story begins at the home of Kelley Woods. There was a swimming pool in the backyard and a pool heater fueled by propane. The propane was delivered from a 500-gallon underground tank. Southern States Cooperative supplied propane to the tank. It was not clear from news reports of the trial who installed the tank. There apparently was testimony that the backyard where the tank was installed was "waterlogged."

Woods had moved into the home in 2015 and by 2017 was apparently attempting to sell it. While Southern States was servicing the tank, she had another propane supplier, Elite Power and Energy, inspect the tank in 2017. It is unclear what prompted the inspection, but Elite found that the tank was leaking. Elite offered to fix or replace the tank, quoting $5,200 to replace it, but Woods responded that money was tight and she would have another company do the work.

RED TAG?

Elite was back to check the tank in 2021 and again noted the leak. Southern States also had employees check the tank in 2021, and they also found a leak. The complaint in the civil lawsuit alleges that, based on inspection and testing of the tank in 2021, Southern States disconnected the tank from the pool heater, locked the tank and red-tagged it.

The tank apparently remained locked and not in use for three years. In February 2024, Woods decided to put the home on the market for sale. She wanted the problem with the underground tank fixed, and so on Feb. 14, she called Southern States. She was told that the tank would need to be filled in order to diagnose and fix the problem. A service call was scheduled for Feb. 22, 2024.

DELIVERY

This calls into question whether the tank had in fact been red-tagged back in 2021. It would certainly be unusual to fill a tank that had been red-tagged for leaks, and it is not clear why Southern States would want to redo the safety inspection it had previously done in 2021, rather than simply dig up the tank and replace it. In fairness, Southern States has not filed an answer to the civil complaint, and so we don't know its side of the story.



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In any event, a Southern States deliveryman appeared at the Woods residence several days later, on Feb. 16, and began to fill the tank, which was apparently empty. This is a bit unusual, because the service call had been scheduled for Feb. 22. However, it could be simply a matter of convenience, such as the driver was already making deliveries in the area and this was added to his schedule.

PROPANE FUMES

According to the civil complaint, the driver began to pump propane into the tank but stopped after delivering about 125 gallons into the 500-gallon tank. He allegedly smelled the heavy odor of propane and "saw propane fumes emanating from the ground." He asked Woods, according to the civil complaint, whether there was anything wrong with the tank.

The complaint is silent on whether Woods told the driver there was a leak in the tank, but it does claim that she called a manager at Southern States, who said, "Oh yeah, it's fine. You're not smelling propane, but the smell is essentially a chemical to let you know that gas is leaking." The manager said that he would dispatch a service technician to check out the situation.

DOORBELL CAMERA

Service Manager Roger Bentley, a 38-year veteran in the propane industry, arrived at the Woods home later that afternoon at about 3:45. He confirmed that the tank was leaking and told Woods that he believed it was leaking at an underground weld. The conversation between Woods and Bentley was recorded by a doorbell camera.

This video was played for the jury in Bentley's subsequent trial, and while it is not publicly available at this time, we do have news reports from the trial, as well as the detailed allegations of the civil complaint.

Bentley allegedly told Woods that it was "not an emergency. Nothing to worry about at all. Bad news is you need to replace that tank." He reportedly told her, "It's not a big deal. I've been doing this a long time, it's OK." He added, "We'll just let it ease out into the ground, [and] we'll all be on our merry way. Unfortunately, you're going to lose 129 gallons of gas; that's the sad part."

Finally, the civil complaint makes the claim that Bentley told Woods not to call the fire department, as it would "make a big deal out of nothing." It is not clear whether this alleged statement was recorded by the doorbell camera.

NOT AN EMERGENCY?

Bentley left the residence, and while Woods did not call the fire department, a neighbor did at 7:36 p.m. Personnel from the Sterling Volunteer Fire Company and Loudoun County Fire and Rescue arrived at 7:48 and confirmed at 7:54 that the tank was leaking. Woods was asked to call Roger Bentley at Southern States, which she did. She placed the call on speakerphone so the fire captain could

speak to him directly. He allegedly was told there was an emergency and that immediate assistance was needed from Southern States.

The civil complaint alleges that Bentley responded, "Respectfully, sir, I know you're doing your job, but I have been doing this a long time and I do not feel it is an emergency." It is not clear whether this call was recorded.

However, firefighters were obtaining readings with gas sensors that showed high levels of propane inside the Woods home. At 8:22, Woods and another person were evacuated from the residence. Two minutes later, at 8:24, a massive explosion destroyed the building. Two firefighters were trapped in the basement.

Fourth-generation volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown was standing outside when the header above the front door struck him in the head, killing him instantly. Eleven others were injured.

CORRODED TANK

Subsequent investigation revealed there were two fingertip-sized holes in the bottom of the underground tank. There was a French drain in the basement leading into the backyard. Investigators believe this drain may have funneled leaking gas into the basement of the Woods home.

As reported previously in this column, Roger Bentley was charged with involuntary manslaughter, and three lesser counts of fire code violations relating to the release of hazardous material. To convict on the manslaughter charge, the prosecution had to demonstrate that, beyond a reasonable doubt, Bentley's actions were "reckless or wanton," and that they showed a "callous disregard of human life and of the probable consequences of his act."

NOT AN 'EASY DECISION'

It is apparent that this case presented a very close question as to whether Roger Bentley had the required state of mind to convict him of manslaughter. According to news reports, the Loudoun Commonwealth's attorney said charging Bentley with a crime was intensely discussed within his office, and that "it wasn't an easy decision to make."

After a two-week trial and 22 hours of deliberation, a jury found Roger Bentley guilty on all counts. As of the writing of this article, he had not filed an appeal, although an appeal is entirely possible given what appears to be a very close question on his state of mind. Sentencing is scheduled for Nov. 6. He could face up to 10 years in prison.



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PROPANE TANK SERVICE AND INSTALLATION TRUCKS AND TRAILERS



Johnny Nickel is managing editor of Butane-Propane News.

‘JUST KEEP FIGHTING, DON’T GIVE UP’

Bergquist’s Mike Vigliotti reflects on the challenges of living with an ALS diagnosis, finding purpose in advocating for research funding & leaning on the support of friends & family

Earlier this year, I was given the opportunity to speak with Bergquist’s customer success manager, Mike Vigliotti. About 10 years ago, Mike was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) — also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. ALS is a neurological disease that targets nerve cells, impacting the body’s ability to control its movements and leading to loss of muscle control.

Since his diagnosis, Mike has dived headfirst into the ALS community, participating in fundraising events, connecting with others who share his diagnosis and opening doors for people to join him as he seeks to support resources for those who might find themselves in his shoes.

In our interview, Mike shared some of the challenges he faces living with ALS and the love and support he has found in family, friends and the propane industry.

Johnny: When did you receive the ALS diagnosis, and how has your daily life been impacted since then?

Mike: The ALS diagnosis part gets a little bit tricky, because I was misdiagnosed. It took a couple of years of doctor appointments and different specialists before I really officially got the diagnosis. It was actually 10 years ago in May that I first saw a doctor and I knew something wasn’t right. My case is a little bit unique with ALS. The average lifespan is only two to five years from the time of diagnosis. I’m in year 10, and I think it’s less than 5% of the cases go 10 years or more. So, I’m incredibly lucky.

But today … it’s impacted not only my life, but my wife, Kris’s, life and family and friends. I have no use of my right hand and arm. I have barely any use of my left hand. I can walk some; my balance is really bad, and when I do walk, I get worn out. The legs get tired very easily, so I spend a good amount of time in a power wheelchair these days. And it affects every aspect of your life. I mean, I used to be super active.

My wife works for Bergquist, as well, and they’ve been unbelievably amazing and awesome working with me through this. But [my wife will] get up at least an hour and a half or so [earlier than me] so she can get herself ready, and then she needs to help me out of bed. She needs to bathe me, you know, all personal grooming — shave me, brush my teeth, shower and then feed me most of the time. … It’s a huge stress on the caregivers, probably as much as it is on me. Breathing function has gotten bad. ALS affects every muscle in your body. Eventually you lose the ability to talk, to eat, swallow and then ultimately breathe. And that’s usually what you die of, respiratory failure.

Today, my lung function is only 42% of its capacity, so I can’t lie down flat and I can’t breathe. I have to use a noninvasive ventilator when I sleep at night, and then usually for a couple of hours during the day to be able to breathe. It’s definitely been a huge impact for sure.

Johnny: I can only imagine. It’s really difficult to go from being capable of doing things somewhat independently to then depending on loved ones and family. … And I’m sure it’s things that you probably didn’t even really think of, or just things that you don’t think about until they happen.

Mike: Yeah, you don’t ever plan for an event like this.

Johnny: You had mentioned working at Bergquist. I didn’t know that your wife works with Bergquist as well. You said





[Top] Mike and his wife, Kris, pose in front of a McAdams truck; [Right] Mike and others advocate for ALS funding.

that it's been a really great experience working with them. Are there any memories or moments that come to your mind that are particularly supportive?

Mike: Yeah, definitely. Since they learned that I had ALS, they've been incredibly supportive. They've made it a corporate initiative to support not only us, but everybody living with ALS. For me personally, I use an eye-tracking device for my laptop. I have a hard time using the computer mouse, so it allows me to use my eyes to control my computer. [Bergquist covers] the cost of all of that. They also include talk-to-tech software from my laptop — just anything that would make my life easier.

They donated and sponsored numerous ALS events back in the fall. Lauren Clark, our CEO, came down here to Florida from Michigan and raised money and awareness. It was kind of a similar event to the old ice bucket challenge, if you might remember that trend from 10 years ago or so, where people were pouring buckets of ice water over their heads. They came down to Florida to do that — [Lauren] and her husband were just awesome. At our open house last year ... we had the ALS association there with the tent set up, and we set up a dunk tank to raise money. It was really an amazing day.

Johnny: That's awesome. It's special to find a company with that level of personal care for their employees and for their people. Do you have any thoughts or advice for companies looking for ways to make the workplace more accommodating, for not only people with ALS, but similar health conditions that severely impact daily life?

Mike: For any employer out there, not even just for ALS but for any health condition, the amount of stress that puts on not only myself, but [my] entire family is huge, which can only make your condition even worse. And if companies can only find a way to somehow accommodate people that are going through something like this, to keep them working as long as they possibly can or want to, it's huge. My greatest hope is that for anybody dealing with ALS or any other illnesses this devastating, that people will be more compassionate and more accommodating to help families.

Johnny: What advice would you give people who have health conditions



McAdams Propane created a wrap for one of its bobtail trucks to raise awareness for ALS.

that are, again, impacting daily life? What advice would you give them about how to get through the day, or advice particularly in the workplace context?

Mike: Just keep fighting, don't give up. Try to keep a positive attitude. It's hard some days to do that, but I think the more positivity you can find in your life, it makes things so much easier. Don't be afraid to reach out for support and help when you need it — you know, friends, family, coworkers.

I think people sometimes genuinely want to help, but they don't know how. And I think one of the things is just asking for that, telling people what they could do to help you out — whether that be coming and sitting with you, just somebody to talk to or taking you for a drive, bringing a meal over.

Just little things like that can make a huge, huge difference. ... I'd tell people, don't be afraid to reach out for help, too, if you need it.

Johnny: I think in a way it can be scary to ask people to do things for you or for help; it's kind of vulnerable.

Mike: It is, yeah. I can't tell you we haven't struggled with that, and sometimes today still do. It is very hard. But like I said, people are more willing to help than I think, than what a lot of us realize sometimes.

Johnny: Yeah, I would think so. If they're asked, especially if it's loved ones and friends, I think they wouldn't hesitate to help. Are there any ways you find yourself helping others with ALS?

Mike: We do a lot of advocating for the ALS association and just ALS in general. Like recently, just in March, here in Florida, there's a fund that the government has to approve every year at the state level. And the ALS association invited Kris and I to go up there to the state capitol in Tallahassee.

We spent a day and a half up there. I think we had a total of 15 meetings with various legislators, congressmen and senators, along with a group of people from the ALS Association. ... I think there are seven certified centers of excellence for ALS and that money goes to help fund those locations to keep them operating. We've done a [fundraising] walk for several years. And I think last year we raised almost $20,000 to go toward research. We do that a lot, as much as we can.

Johnny: Is that where you find — and I know you had mentioned this — trying to be positive and finding ways to find joy? Is that something that gives you joy and purpose?

Mike: Absolutely, it does. And through all this, since we moved to Florida, going through some of these different events, we've met other couples that live right here in the Villages, and we've been a good friend group. Unfortunately, two of those gentlemen just recently passed away with ALS. But it is nice just to bring some life to each other [and also bring] some positivity to each other.

Johnny: I imagine community makes such a big difference. I think especially with what you were saying, where I feel like in our culture, we don't really want to embrace or see a lot of the difficulties of life — not just with ALS but with so many other health conditions.

And I'm sure that having a community where you feel seen and valued is pretty important.

Mike: Absolutely. You know, one other thing about this, one other highlight: Since dealing with this and being at Bergquist, a little over a year ago, I had an idea for a propane bobtail to be logoed for ALS awareness. I approached one of our customers in Texas — McAdams Propane. They've been a customer for many years, and we've become good friends with them.

They immediately jumped on board with the idea, and with the help of them and the ALS Association, some designers came up with a wrap for the bobtail to raise awareness for ALS, and it has a QR code on it. For every delivery that truck makes, they donate a dollar back to the ALS Association. So that was a really neat experience as well.

Johnny: That's awesome. Related to that, are there certain organizations that you suggest our readers could donate to or volunteer with?

Mike: Oh man, there are so many of them out there, and this is a tough one. Team Gleason would be one for sure. I like that one because they're directly helping patients with things. And then really another one — and Bergquist made a nice donation this year — is Duke University neurology clinic. ... We know that any money that gets donated to the Duke ALS clinic is going specifically toward clinical trials. ... So those would be two organizations I would say would be really good.

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WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN PROPANE SUPPLY AHEAD OF THIS WINTER

Experts share supply & risk management strategies to navigate the uncertainties of tariffs & world conflict in 2025-2026

BY PAT THORNTON

"The Chinese zodiac sign for 2025 calls this the 'year of the snake,'" said J.D. Buss, president of Westlark Advisors. "It might be more appropriately called the 'year of tariffs.' Multiple dates have come and gone with tariffs being implemented, pulled back, threatened again and then reinstituted."

Buss did not want to make a statement regarding whether tariffs will continue or for how long, but touched on their impact and two key items to watch.

"The immediate impact of tariffs was a downward pressure on the energy markets," Buss said. "From early January 2025 through April 2025, West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude prices went from a high of $80/barrel (bbl) to $55/bbl. Tariff reprieve and conflict in the Middle East allowed crude to soar back to the upper $70s/bbl before dipping to the $65/bbl level once tariffs came back into vogue in mid-July."



Buss said that another impact from tariffs has been a heightened level of uncertainty that can push buyers and sellers into snap decisions.

"An example of this came in April when Middle Eastern trading firms and suppliers purchased U.S. export volumes to arbitrage global tariff regulations. Many Middle Eastern firms have close ties to Asian buyers, from India to China, and these firms also were not subject to U.S. tariffs. This allowed for U.S. volumes to still serve Asian buyers, just through alternative supply routes."

This shift, however, has not been able to last all through the summer. As of July 2025, Buss noted that "Aug. 12 looms as the next deadline for a China/U.S. trade deal to be completed. Some firms may be waiting until there is more clarity regarding if, or what kind of, a deal is completed to make more propane purchases. That may be contributing to some of the stronger build rates during June and early July 2025.

"While we watch the impact of price changes and volume shifts due to uncertainty, we must keep looking at how we prepare to weather the continued tariff storm that may persist through the rest of this season," Buss said. "We see two key elements for every retail distributor to watch.

"First, stay abreast of international activities," he continued. "Any shift or change in international propane buying has a massive impact on U.S. inventory and price levels. Rarely does it matter if there will be a strong crop dry or if there will be cold weather."

Buss said what has become more important is if Chinese propane dehydrogenation (PDH) plants shift from naphtha to propane or vice versa, if it is exceptionally cold in Europe and Asia for winter, and if there are any operational issues at an export loading facility.

"These impact prices much more than items that impact domestic North American demand."

Second, Buss said to know the meaning of a tariff. "Tariffs are usually on products moving from one country to another. Specifically, every importer is required to provide an invoice to U.S. customs documenting the value of their product that is crossing into the U.S."

He noted there always exists a possibility that this customs invoice could be quite different from the potential proposed tariff that a supplier could charge at a terminal.

"As the saying goes, the devil is in the details, and understanding the details of tariffs could save your firm money in future months.

"As we have cleared the halfway point of 2025, tariffs could be impacting the economy for the remainder of this year," Buss concluded. "While we may not be able to change that, we can prepare ourselves to understand the impact of tariffs and prepare our business to make the best decisions during this time as well."

Anne Keller, managing director at Midstream Energy Group, said, "My thought framework for this is that the [Trump] administration has so far kept its promise to American consumers to keep the prices of oil products low, even though it has introduced conflicts with the other goal of increasing domestic production."

She noted tariffs and restrictions on ethane and propane exports have introduced risks to Chinese chemical producers.

"One apparent side effect is that China's imports of naphtha — an alternative ethylene feedstock — have risen quite a bit," she said. "For the 2025-2026 winter season, this should mean plenty of domestic supply and minimal upward price pressure. As of today, forward wholesale prices for Q4 are only 2-3 cents above current levels, which indicates the market isn't too concerned about negative surprises so far."

"The concern over tariffs to date seems to be overdone so far," said Jeff Thompson, supply consultant at Propane Resources. "Much of the tariff increases are being eaten without pass-through to consumers. Propane is net long in the U.S. The tariff impact would likely play out with countries restricting propane imports from the U.S. This would back up propane in the U.S. and possibly weaken prices."

"Trying to decipher and make decisions based on the ever-changing tariff and trade negotiations doesn't sound very easy," said Phil Farris, director of Wholesale Marketing at 3Eight Energy. "I think uncertainty is the key word. Uncertainty is risk, so you either accept it or try to protect yourself from the possible effects."

Additional Global Factors as Winter 2025-2026 Approaches

As of mid-July, when BPN spoke to supply experts, propane inventories were at 82.5 million barrels (MMbbls), very close to levels a year earlier, with many analysts believing inventory could reach 100 MMbbls by the beginning of the fourth quarter when weather starts to lead to drawdowns. Mont Belvieu, Texas, propane was trading at 72 cents per gallon (cpg) and Conway, Kansas, propane was trading at 68 cpg.

With exports continually able to go out of the U.S. in large quantities amid many global factors, BPN asked the experts about the biggest issues to watch that may affect prices in the coming weeks and months. The war in the Middle East, as well as the Russia-Ukraine war, were noted in addition to tariffs for the uncertainty they bring to the marketplace.

"History tells us over and over to look for the peak crisis and sell it," Thompson said. "Crude has continued to move and any attempt to shut down the Strait of Hormuz would be met with a punishing response from the U.S. Ukraine is a European event. Oil and gas continue to move. It is the world's life blood. [Russian President Vladimir] Putin can't surrender or negotiate. It would show weakness. This is going to last a long time. From an energy point of view, it opened and deepened markets for U.S. energy, including propane."

"We believe the odds of a 'negative' surprise, meaning higher prices, are probably higher than our mainstream media is expecting," Keller said. "We see a persistent gap between commentary

around moderation (sub $65 for U.S. WTI) in crude prices and published data that shows inventories at five-year lows for oil in key areas, along with continuing issues with distillate supply. Propane can substitute for distillate if unexpected events cause severe shortages and liquefied natural gas can't in the near term. And severe winter weather will tighten the market if it is widespread."

"Similar to the tariff concerns, these are activities you have no control over," Farris said. "'Markets on edge' means waiting for an event to spike prices. Do you wait and watch or protect yourself beforehand?"

Farris noted that this year, nontraditional issues seem to have more influence on markets. "Politics, military conflicts, the Middle East, tariffs, trade deals — all issues that can change direction quickly, and U.S. retailers have no control over this," he said. "With inventory and transportation issues, the solutions or adjustments are clearer. Nontraditional issues create more confusion and uncertainty."

Regional Supply Challenges & Concerns for 2025-2026

BPN asked the supply experts to discuss regional challenges and concerns to be aware of for 2025-2026.

"In the Southeast, PADD 3 inventory appears to be heading in the right direction, so supply should be adequate," Farris said. "For dealers that have prepared and developed key relationships, transportation should not be an issue. Rail movements are always affected by weather and holidays, and pipeline or terminal mechanical issues are always a concern, especially with an aged distribution system."

"PADD 2 is the market to watch. PADD 3 is exports," Thompson said. "If the Midwest gets pulled early, it could be a long winter. If Q4 is mild, traders will likely relax but look to run Conway if the opportunity presents itself."

Thompson believes this would put us at the point of build season where traders will start looking at fundamentals.

"How much inventory is in PADD 2 and what can we expect? As long as we stay on the north side of the five-year average, traders will watch it. If we get below the five-year average, traders could start pushing prices higher."

"Although prices could move up on headline news, U.S. supply should still be more than adequate for our domestic markets," Keller said. "The [liquefied petroleum gas] shipping companies have caught a bid recently, most likely on the projection that export volumes will move up with capacity expansions at Energy Transfer's Nederland and Marcus Hook terminals. But with China holding back, we shouldn't have concerns about maintaining supply."

Keller said issues that might affect winter supply include the operational status of the Marcus Hook expansion and Canadian West Coast exports.

"If we have a severe winter in the Northern Hemisphere, Northeast marketers could find themselves bidding against European markets later. In the northern Rockies, the supply we're used to being able to get from Canada is also a focus for Asian buyers who are now able to take over 100 bbls per day from Vancouver — 15 days closer than the U.S. Gulf."

Keller encouraged retailers to watch the status of projects designed to pull barrels from formerly "stranded" supply points that are being connected to regional Y-grade systems in the Bakken and Powder River basins. "Oneok's Elk Creek pipeline expansion adds another 135 MMbbls per day of capacity to move NGLs south, and their intent to build an export terminal in Texas means tightening balances in the region," Keller said. "Kinder's Double HH crude pipeline conversion to NGL service will provide area producers with another pipeline outlet for C3+ from field compression and older gas plants, which pulls those barrels out of the regional market too."

What Is a Good Buying Strategy in This Market?

Is it time to buy gallons for this winter or even for future seasons? BPN asked the supply experts for their thoughts on this.

"There is some risk of a move up in prices, but with the Q3-Q4 differential as low as it is, it seems safe to wait a bit longer to make that call," Keller said. "Would it be worthwhile to cover gallons for future winters? Even though the outlook for NGL supply is continued growth — even if only because the gas portion of U.S. hydrocarbon production continues to grow — the odds that U.S. crude supply growth is over are getting higher. If policy continues to favor lower consumer prices over [exploration and production] industry costs and exports continue to grow, we could have a 'supply surprise' that lifts the forward curve. Out year buys for 2026-2027 and beyond are worth considering."

"2025-2026 is about making budget. 2026 and beyond is about opportunity," Thompson said. "Cover what you've sold this winter. Start layering 2026 and beyond in small increments."

"Historically, margins are good — even exceptional in most areas. It hasn't always been that way, and it won't stay that way forever," Farris said. "Are you going to play the market, betting on even better results? Or take what you know will be a solid performance? Why let things you can't control decide the outcome? Still, everyone has their own ideas, and the answer is as much as you are comfortable with. If the market uncertainty is there (or even greater) for the future, why not take the same precautions as this year to protect your business? So yes — as far out as possible."

Pat Thornton is a 25-year veteran of the propane industry, with 20 years at Propane Resources and five years at Butane-Propane News. He has served on the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC) Safety & Training Advisory Committee and the Missouri PERC board of directors.





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THE TOP 3 WAYS TO ENSURE SUCCESSFUL PROPANE PURCHASING

An intentional plan for navigating propane supply & demand starts with assessing your preparation tactics & flexibility

BY J.D. BUSS

SHANE COTEE - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

"Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance." This phrase, often called the "Five Ps," was coined by James Baker, who was secretary of state under President George H. W. Bush. Of course, fans of the British Army will use the seven Ps: "Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents P*** Poor Performance." But since this is a professional article, we will refrain from one of those "P" words.

Whichever "P" phrase you prefer, the theme remains the same: Plan and prepare properly. For those participating in a "P" industry — propane — these words of advice need to be heeded. But what do proper planning and preparation look like in the propane industry? Ahead are three ways you can ensure stability in your company's propane supply.

1. Be Curious

During a pivotal episode in the first season of the Apple TV+ series "Ted Lasso," the title character says this quote: "Be curious, not judgmental." While Ted incorrectly attributes the quote to Walt Whitman (it appears to have first been written in an advice column for The Charlotte Observer in 1986), he did accurately show why it's more important to be curious.

For both tenured and relatively new entrants into the propane world, being curious is vital. Be curious about why North American propane consumption is drastically dwarfed by the massive amount of volume leaving the continent via exports. Remain curious about the factors international buyers are using to decide when to purchase propane and why. Curiously ask why some practices, which were successful in decades past, may not have the same effectiveness in today's market.

The propane landscape for both supply and demand has shifted dramatically over the last 15 years. This shift requires the need for any distributor to be open to new strategies.

2. Be Ready

While speaking at the Michigan Propane Gas Association's summer convention in July, I provided a picture showing the



average Mont Belvieu, Texas, prices by month for the last two decades. The first period we observed was from 2015 to 2024. There were two quick observations we made from this table:

1. During each calendar year (January to December), the lowest and second-lowest average priced month had occurred almost equally between summer and winter months. The summer months (April to September) saw nine of the lowest or second-lowest priced months, while the winter period contained 11 of those data points.
2. September 2024, which was the lowest priced average month of 2024, was a two decade-plus outlier.

After reviewing this table, we shifted to the prior decade (2005 to 2014) and made these observations:

1. Eighty percent of the time, the lowest or second-lowest priced month occurred in the winter period (October to March).
2. The average winter Mont Belvieu price for this decade came in at $1.13/gallon, almost 40 cents per gallon higher than the next decade.

Why does this fit into our "be ready" description? The last decade was a sharp departure from the prior decade. In addition, the most recent decade demonstrated that low prices could — and may — take place during any time of the year. This creates a need for retail distributors to be ready "in season and out of season" to price-protect their programs.

3. Be Flexible

One of the gifts my wife and I wanted to provide our sons was the experience of travel. Besides experiencing many new places and foods, travel also gives you the distinct honor of learning to be flexible. Never does a trip go completely as planned, and if you are going to make it through a family trip (without hurting relationships), you have to be flexible.

Proper preparation involves both a mental attitude of flexibility and the creation of a portfolio that can actually be flexible. Over the years, I have often heard these phrases spoken in the middle of winter: "But this is the terminal I like to lift from." "I only deliver on these days." "We always deliver this number of gallons per drop." Or, "This supplier will always take care of me."

If you look carefully at the above statements, they all have some form of an absolute statement: "I like," "I only," "we always," "will always." By making absolute, definitive statements, you reduce your mental ability to be flexible. And by reducing that flexibility prior to winter or prior to a challenging moment, you will likely hesitate too long to take corrective action that could help your business during those difficult moments.

One action you can do to improve mental flexibility is to prepare a supply portfolio that has built-in flexibility. Outlining different potential supply terminals outside of your region or personal preference prior to winter is a first step. Step two involves identifying how you could actually lift from those facilities in a moment of crisis. Other ways to create a flexible supply portfolio involve knowing multiple transportation options. Owning a single transport and expecting to rely on that for all your winter needs could place you in a dire situation when that transport breaks down in the middle of January.

The last aspect of supply flexibility involves insurance — not your traditional business or vehicle insurance, but rather building into your supply portfolio a potentially more expensive option that has a low risk of failure. This could mean paying a premium for 5%-10% of your supply, paying a higher fee for guaranteed transportation for a certain number of loads or increasing your own storage capacity to grow your flexibility.

The domestic North American propane industry of 20-30 years ago has morphed into a massive export market that now supplies most of the world. Such a change requires a different type of planning and preparation. Being curious about what drives international buying decisions, being ready to make purchasing decisions at any time and being flexible in your supply plans are necessary decisions to make sure you have properly prepared for the oncoming winters. There is never a way to plan or mitigate every possible challenge, but you can certainly prepare yourself for the best methods to tackle what challenges may come your way.

J.D. Buss, CPA, CTA, has been the president of Westlark Advisors since he purchased the company (formerly known as Twin Feathers Advisors) in December 2021. He has worked with companies throughout North America, the Caribbean, Central America and beyond regarding supply and hedging strategies. To find out more about the Westlark team, go to westlarkadvisors.com or contact Buss at jd@westlarkadvisors.com.





BUILDING A BETTER FORKLIFT PROPANE CAGE

Inside a propane tech startup company & how it is simplifying propane cylinder delivery

BY JOHNNY NICKEL

The opportunity for starting new adventures in propane is everywhere.

Hunter Raley, founder and CEO of CageWatch, a propane technology startup, found his own opportunity in the niche market of forklift cylinder cage technology.

BPN sat down with Raley to learn more about his experiences founding a propane startup company, as well as the technology CageWatch employs to streamline cylinder delivery.

WHAT IS THE STORY BEHIND STARTING CAGEWATCH? WHAT ARE THE MAIN GAPS IN CYLINDER CAGE TECHNOLOGY THAT YOU ARE SEEKING TO MEET?

CageWatch started during the height of the forklift cylinder shortage. While trying to get a small cylinder delivery company started myself, I ran into some major challenges with a couple customers who would always wait until they were completely out of propane to call for a delivery. With lead times on forklift cylinders from manufacturers estimating almost 18 months at the time, I decided to dedicate some time and effort to create a tool that maximizes my profit per delivery and ensures my customers never run out of gas and switch to a different supplier.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW CAGEWATCH'S TECHNOLOGY WORKS?

CageWatch is designed to retrofit into forklift cylinder cages to monitor the orientation of tanks within the enclosure. Forklift operators are typically instructed to position empty cylinders in the cage facing backward. Utilizing this practice, CageWatch enables automated, just-in-time deliveries for forklift customers, replacing traditional scheduled or will-call delivery methods.

WHAT HAS THE PROCESS BEEN LIKE DEVELOPING THIS TECHNOLOGY, FROM EARLY BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS TO STEPS TOWARD CURRENT LICENSING AND DEVELOPMENT?

Developing this product has been a slow and challenging journey. I set some strict feature requirements from the beginning, like extended battery life and over-the-air updates for future software and hardware improvements. Engineering for hazardous environments like propane locations demanded extra effort and frequent redesigns. With guidance from our certification partner and collaborators, we modified the original design to meet industry standards, addressing questions and making informed decisions daily to create the best solution possible. One of my favorite stories to tell is when the device detected cylinder theft from a customer's cage at night, allowing me to quickly replace the stolen cylinders before they impacted operations. We could not catch the bandit, but it did help my customer solve a few other theft issues they were having.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU THINK READERS WOULD FIND INTERESTING ABOUT THE CURRENT CYLINDER MARKET?

The market remains stable, much like forklift cylinder design, which hasn't needed updates in years. With certain industry

standards firmly established, engineers have room to innovate around them. The main challenge is developing solutions that genuinely benefit the industry's daily operations.

HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ANY CHALLENGES IN OPERATING A STARTUP BUSINESS IN A WELL-ESTABLISHED MARKET?

We have consistently faced significant challenges. Operating within an industry where even the slightest spark poses the risk of catastrophic incidents necessitates that we design products and solutions adhering to the highest safety standards. The introduction of new products, particularly electronics, is typically approached with caution in this market. Securing partnerships with other cylinder delivery companies for live product testing with their customers emerged as our greatest obstacle. The absence of external feedback from other suppliers during early development and testing required us to address all potential issues independently, relying solely on our internal expertise and research.

ARE THERE ANY MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS — EITHER WITH OTHER INDUSTRY MEMBERS OR COMPANIES — THAT YOU HAVE FORMED DURING THIS JOURNEY?

We have engaged in discussions with industry members. Currently, we are in preliminary conversations with long-term industry participants about potential partnerships to develop a more streamlined solution for all stakeholders.

DO YOU HAVE ANY PLANS FOR FUTURE GROWTH? WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE IN THE NEAR-TERM AND IN THE FUTURE?

With a successful launch in the U.S. and Canada, there is potential to expand into Australia and other markets. The propane industry operates globally and plays an important role in logistics and the supply chain. Enhancing efficiency within the supply chain benefits all parties involved. There are also plans to broaden the application of certain technologies beyond forklift cylinders, though we have quite a bit of work to do before we can truly speak to it.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHERS LOOKING TO INNOVATE OR ESTABLISH NEW BUSINESSES IN THE PROPANE TECH INDUSTRY?

There is plenty of room for innovation in any industry but especially in one dedicated to service. Looking at our own daily operations and where we can improve our services will in turn increase our profits.

Johnny Nickel is managing editor of Butane-Propane News.



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EDUCATING THE SKEPTICS ON PROPANE'S PROMISE

A booth-side conversation on how to position traditional & renewable propane as a fuel of choice

BY JACQUELINE PIAZZA & RICHARD VAN ORDEN III

The coffee cups between us are already half-empty, a little steam still curling from the surface. Outside, morning light spills across the diner's parking lot, catching the chrome of passing cars. A server swings by with the easy rhythm of someone who's worked here forever, refilling our mugs without asking.

We've been talking about other things: board meetings, travel schedules, a side comment about whether the grilled cheese here has changed in 20 years; though, today it's eggs and toast, when I tilt my head and say, "So, New Jersey wants a bigger voice."

I've been in propane just four years. Long enough to have a solid grasp of the industry, but still learning the deeper currents. Across from me sits Rich Van Orden, three decades in — the kind of person who's navigated these waters more times than he can count.

I've learned more from these casual conversations than from any manual or webinar. Half the time, I'm still scribbling notes long after he's switched topics.

Rich grins, setting his spoon down. "Not just New Jersey. Every state wants a bigger voice. But wanting it is one thing. Earning it is another."

I tap my finger against my mug. "Earning it, how? I mean, we have a strong presence already."



"That's true," he says, leaning back. "But earning it means proving we're not just reactive. It's about being in the room early and shaping the conversation before it shapes us. It's easy to show up when something's already in your backyard. It's harder to be there before the problem even starts."

That's the gap I'm still learning to bridge: how to pinpoint the next problem before anyone else sees it coming.

I frown. "Like that hearing where half the people didn't realize they were talking about LPG [liquefied petroleum gas], not LNG [liquefied natural gas]?"

He points at me, eyes bright. "I know. They weren't just a little misinformed; they were on the wrong field entirely. And if we're not there to fix that, the wrong story sticks. We can't assume people know the difference."

I used to think everyone in energy understood these distinctions. Turns out, sometimes I'm the one asking the most basic questions, and Rich never makes me feel foolish for it.

I take some home fries from the plate between us. "So, the 'bigger voice' isn't just being louder; it's educating before the damage is done."

"Right," he says with a small grin, sliding the plate a little closer. "And we also need to show our own industry walking the talk. Which isn't always happening."

I nod. "Like high-volume operations where diesel's dominance isn't as necessary."

"That's a perfect example," he says, leaning forward. "In some fleets, propane can replace diesel without sacrificing performance, all while cutting emissions and improving safety. And it's not just theory; it's happening."

I picture the first time he walked me through one of these case studies — pages of numbers I barely grasped and how he translated them into something I could explain to the board the next day.

I sip my coffee. "But here's the challenge: Most marketers aren't in a position to research incentives or push a project like that on their own. They're running their businesses."

"That's where the New Jersey Propane Gas Association [NJPGA] comes in," he says, pausing to butter his toast. "We watch the legislative landscape, track incentive programs and then we connect members with the right resources so they can make the most of them."

"We can put the opportunity in front of them," I add, "and walk them through the requirements. The company still decides if they want to take that step, but at least they've got a clear path.

"And in New Jersey," I continue, "that's even more important because we've had an administration that's been all-in on electric only. No energy choice."

"Yep," he says between bites. "We have to push for that seat at the table. And we have to push with data, not just opinion. Show the emissions numbers. Show the cost savings. Show resilience. That's how you shift a conversation in a tough political climate."

The server returns with a fresh pot, the coffee splashing slightly onto the table. Rich thanks her and wraps his hands around the mug like he's gathering a thought. This is where my learning curve shows. I tend to lead with the human story, then back into the data. Rich does both in one breath.

"You know what opens people up?" I say. "Not just charts. A concrete example they can picture. At that school bus meeting last year, we were going nowhere until we mentioned that one district had switched to propane and cut costs. Everyone sat up. If we want propane to gain ground, we also have to be seen using it ourselves and making opportunities easy for others in the industry to follow."

I scoop another bite of the home fries we've been sharing, pausing for a moment. "Renewable propane was another one I didn't get at first. I thought it was some far-off dream. Thanks for walking me through that one, too, a while ago. Now I know it's here."

Rich leans back slightly, listening, and I can see him weighing how much to unpack at once. "Made from waste fats, used cooking oils, ag byproducts — people can picture that. And it drops right into existing systems, no new equipment. Marketers sometimes think it's replacing traditional propane, but it's not. It's an evolution and a business opportunity."

I'm still catching up on the science, but the idea that something so future-facing works with what's already in place feels like a golden ticket.

"And how it looks matters," I say. "People in the school bus industry have said to me, 'Why convert to propane if your own industry doesn't power its own vehicles with it?'"

"Truth is," he says, "a bobtail isn't designed to run entirely on propane. Diesel still makes sense in some heavy-duty applications. But we are seeing propane-powered vehicles in high-profile places, and in the right balance, propane can even fill the gaps where electric systems fall short, especially in cold

climates, rural areas, or during outages, or even moving a lot of cargo."

"That includes some major port operations," I say.

"Right," Rich explains. "Newark's port just put 20 propane-powered terminal tractors into service. Ninety-nine percent less nitrogen oxide than diesel. Almost no particulate matter. No drop in performance. It's not for show. It's lowering emissions, improving safety for workers and it saves money long term."

"And that's the kind of example that moves the needle with skeptics," I say, "especially when it comes from a trusted operation. If I had to boil it down, I'd say meet people where they are. Whether they're worried about cost, climate or reliability, speak their language first."

"And use plain language — no acronyms unless you explain them," Rich says. He starts ticking off points with his fingers. "One, propane's role in resilience. Two, how it works when the grid goes down. Three, how it's cleaner than diesel and heating oil. And four, how it's affordable and reliable for rural areas."

He explains it slowly, the way you do when you want each point to land. It's not the first time he's explained them, but he treats it like it matters every time.

I tuck that list away like a mental checklist. I'm still adding to it every time we talk. Some points I've heard before, but hearing them again in a different context makes them click in a new way.

"And don't forget internal education," he says. "Our state association, other states, the Propane Education & Research Council [PERC], the National Propane Gas Association [NPGA] — we've got resources, talking points, case studies, side-by-side comparisons. If our marketers aren't equipped, the message dies before it leaves the building."

FOR MORE RESOURCES:

Propane Education & Research Council:
propane.com — technical fact sheets, emissions comparisons and renewable propane resources

National Propane Gas Association:
npga.org — policy updates, advocacy tools and legislative engagement opportunities

Energy for Everyone Hero Award coverage:
propane.com/ports — details on propane-powered equipment at U.S. ports

State energy offices:
Search your state's energy office for grants and incentives supporting clean energy and fleet conversion

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"One thing I've learned at NPGA's Propane Days," I say, "is that NPGA has you covered to help you talk with legislators. It's up to us not to wait until there's a bill on the floor to introduce ourselves to a legislator, though. It could be too late by then."

"Exactly," he says. "Relationships happen before the hearings start. Invite them for a site visit at a marketer's facility. Show them the safety measures, the innovation. We've had great success in New Jersey with open houses for public officials and fleet managers in the past. When they know you and trust you, they'll listen when it counts."

That's one of those truths I've seen play out over and over, but I still need the reminder, especially when my calendar is already packed.

"We need more of them, though," I say. "We need marketers to open their doors for these public-facing representatives."

"So, you keep bringing it up. You keep putting the thought in front of them," Rich says.

The check lands on the table, but neither of us moves for it. I glance at my watch, then back at Rich.

"So, if someone asked me what we're doing here in this conversation, in this article, I'd say we're making sure people don't just hear about propane — they understand it."

He nods, finishing his coffee. "And that starts with us leading the conversation. Not waiting for those skeptics to come around shutting us down, but showing them, first, with facts, and with proof."

"And a little humility," I interject.

"Yes, of course," he says. "We show up with facts, proof and humility: that propane — both the traditional and the renewable options — delivers cleaner, more resilient energy today."

I smile. "And maybe, if they're lucky, they'll get a booth like this and a plate of home fries while we tell them about it."

"That's the plan," he says.

Jacqueline Piazza is the executive director of NJPGA, co-chair of Women in Propane's (WIP) Knowledge Exchange and New Jersey WIP Ambassador. Piazza oversees association operations, advocates for the industry, fosters member engagement and advances industry initiatives.



Richard Van Orden III is a propane training manager at Star Group LP, with more than 30 years of industry experience spanning delivery, installation, service and safety. He serves as NJPGA treasurer and education chair, and as a PERC Leadership in Energy Ambassador.



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HOW TO BUILD A DECADES-LONG, CUSTOMER-CENTERED EVENT OUTREACH PROGRAM

Inside Rural Computer Consultants' 27th customer seminar

BY NANCY MATHISON

IMAGES COURTESY OF RURAL COMPUTER CONSULTANTS



A poster from RCC's customer seminar

At Rural Computer Consultants (RCC), the customer seminar is not just an event — it's a yearlong journey of preparation, collaboration and purpose. Since 1998, RCC's seminar has been a cornerstone of our commitment to customer education, innovation and connection. It's where RCC development meets RCC fun, and where we grow together — side by side with the customers who fuel our passion.

Connecting in this way is hugely beneficial for the partnership between a company and its customers. We hope as we share a bit about RCC's seminar experience, you'll gain insights into how to pull off a successful event that strengthens your customer connection.

RCC'S 27TH ANNUAL SEMINAR

This year's seminar was especially meaningful. It served as both a celebration and a heartfelt farewell to our founder, Brian Sheehan — known affectionately as the "Big Cheese" at RCC, "Lion Brian" to more than 1.4 million Lions Club International members, and simply brother, uncle, dad or friend to so many in our RCC family and the Bird Island community.

When asked where he wanted to celebrate this milestone, Brian didn't hesitate: the Menger Hotel in San Antonio. And from that moment, Team Francy (Freddie Ridler and me, Nancy — emcees and ringmasters since 2019) hit the ground running.

After reviewing customer feedback and discussions from past events, we knew it was time to raise the bar. This year marked our first four-full-day seminar, packed with more value, insight and engagement than ever before.

We focused on the topics our customers care about most, showcasing RCC's latest innovations and offering hands-on training for our products and software solutions. And we weren't alone in this effort. A few years ago, a couple of our integration partners asked to attend and learn alongside our customers. That small idea has grown into a full vendor and partner experience. This year featured 18 vendors and three media sponsors, all joining to support the customer experience.

But it wasn't all business. True to RCC style, we balanced learning with laughter and connection. We were honored to have two keynote sessions that truly moved the room. Brian Sheehan opened up about his journey of leadership, service and the lifelong impact of community involvement through the Lions. Then, speaker and author James Robilotta led an interactive workshop focused on embracing imperfection and using authenticity to build meaningful personal and professional relationships.

And, of course, we had fun! From the scenic San Antonio River Walk cruise to Holey Moley golf night, from the vendor fair to open roundtable chats with RCC staff and vendors — every activity was designed to bring people together.

The highlight? The RCC Customer and Vendor Appreciation Night, a night full of karaoke, line dancing and joyful celebration. And we couldn't close out the week without our beloved Pajama Day, where we turned up the comfort — and the style — with a perfectly themed "Making Propane Sexy" finale.

We're immensely grateful to every RCC team member — from presenters to behind-the-scenes support staff — who made this week possible. Our team's dedication fuels our ability to support the "Fuel People, by Fuel People."

Curious about how to implement something like our customer seminar in your own company? From our experience, we have found great success by including these key seminar elements:

ROUNDTABLES

These small-group sessions with RCC staff — and often vendors — create a valuable opportunity for customers to be truly heard. They provide a setting to



Participants at RCC's customer seminar pose on Pajama Day.

discuss real needs, get direct answers and foster meaningful dialogue.

VARIETY OF TOPICS & TRAINERS

A dynamic lineup of session topics and fresh faces leading the content keeps things engaging and energizing. This variety ensures there's something for everyone while maintaining attention and enthusiasm throughout the day.

GAMES & GIVEAWAYS

We love to sprinkle in some fun! Interactive games, company trivia and lighthearted competition bring laughter into the learning — and let's be honest, who doesn't love walking away with a little "Making Propane Sexy" swag or a crisp $2 bill?

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Whether it's a respected voice from the propane industry or an inspiring motivational speaker, our keynotes are designed to broaden perspectives. These sessions encourage attendees to think beyond daily tasks and reflect on how they connect — with their teams, their customers and themselves.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Each year, rotating in new host cities adds a fresh sense of adventure to the seminar experience. Over the past 27 years, we've explored 16 different cities across the U.S., allowing us to offer new entertainment and experiences along the way. While our roots are proudly in Minnesota — and we'll continue to bring the seminar home in select years to share a true taste of who we are — hosting in exciting destinations keeps the experience fresh and gives our customers the chance to blend business with leisure.



RCC merch is displayed at the company booth.

MUSIC & SNACKS

A well-curated playlist by our A/V professional keeps the energy up during transitions and breaks. Music adds a vibe, and snacks throughout the day keep minds focused and stomachs happy. Because let's face it — no one learns well when they're hungry!

APPRECIATION & ENTERTAINMENT

After a full day of learning, it's time to unwind. Whether it's enjoying a ballgame, catching a show or singing along to karaoke, our evening events offer a well-deserved break. It's the perfect setting to build relationships, laugh together and maybe even discover a shared love for a favorite song.

And don't worry — Team Francy is already dreaming big for 2026. We can't wait for what's next!



Participants at the customer seminar pose for a funny picture.

Nancy Mathison is the sales and communication executive assistant at Rural Computer Consultants, based in Bird Island, Minnesota. She leads RCC's ongoing education and training efforts, coordinates key events — including the annual RCC Customer Seminar — and drives customer engagement initiatives. With over a decade of experience in the fuel software industry, Mathison brings a fresh, personable approach to connecting with customers and fostering strong relationships. Mathison can be reached at nmathison@rccbi.com.



ESSENTIAL EMERGENCY OPERATIONS STANDARDS FOR PROPANE MARKETERS

Building a culture of safety to protect people & your public trust

BY CHRIS MCGUIRE



In the propane industry, emergency preparedness isn't just a regulatory requirement — it's a fundamental responsibility that protects employees, customers and entire communities. Every propane marketer faces the reality that emergencies can occur without warning, making comprehensive operational procedures and safety standards not just advisable, but critical for business continuity and public trust.

SAFETY-FIRST CULTURE IN EMERGENCY PROPANE OPERATIONS

The cornerstone of effective emergency operations begins with establishing a safety-first culture throughout the organization. This means ensuring the safety of your drivers, customer service representatives, customers and community remains paramount in every decision and procedure.

When employees understand that their well-being and that of their customers takes precedence over normal business operations, they're more likely to follow protocols and make sound decisions under pressure. This philosophy should permeate every aspect of operations, from routine deliveries to crisis response. Company leadership, from home office to local branches, must consistently demonstrate this commitment, providing adequate resources, training and support systems that enable employees to prioritize safety without fear of negative consequences.

Propane marketers face a unique set of potential emergencies that require specialized response procedures. Gas leaks represent perhaps the most serious and common emergency, with the potential for explosion, fire or asphyxiation. These incidents can occur during delivery, at customer locations or at storage facilities, each requiring specific response protocols.

Vehicle accidents involving propane delivery trucks present complex challenges, combining traditional traffic accident procedures with hazardous material considerations. The proximity of propane cylinders or bulk tanks to accident scenes requires immediate assessment of leak potential and evacuation procedures.

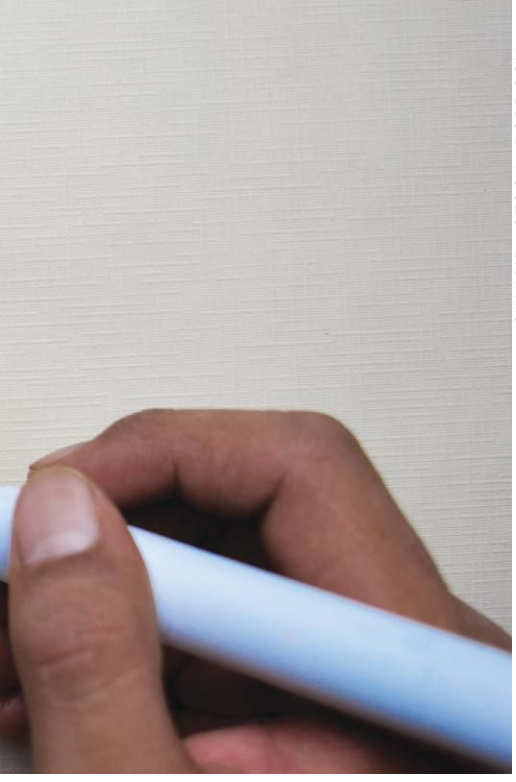
Environmental hazards, including insect stings and dog bites, while seemingly minor, can create serious medical emergencies for drivers working in remote locations. These incidents require immediate first-aid response and clear communication protocols to ensure rapid medical attention when needed.

Equipment failures, including cylinder valve malfunctions, delivery truck mechanical issues and storage system problems, can escalate into emergency situations requiring immediate response and specialized expertise.

COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Effective emergency response depends on clear, established communication chains that ensure information flows quickly to the right personnel. This begins with defining specific roles and responsibilities for different types of emergencies. Customer service representatives need immediate access to emergency contacts, including drivers, managers, home office staff when appropriate, and even local fire departments and medical services. Drivers require direct communication lines to dispatch and management, with backup communication plans discussed when primary systems fail.

Managing communication with customers, regulatory agencies, media and community members during emergencies requires predetermined protocols and designated spokespersons. Clear, accurate information sharing



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helps prevent panic and misinformation and demonstrates the company's commitment to transparency and public safety.

THE ROLE OF TRAINING IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Regular, comprehensive training programs form the backbone of effective emergency preparedness. Training should cover both prevention strategies and response procedures, ensuring employees can recognize potential hazards before they become emergencies and respond appropriately when incidents occur.

Driver and service technician training must include hazard recognition, proper handling techniques for different types of propane containers, emergency shutdown procedures and basic first aid. Customer service representatives need training in emergency call handling, evacuation coordination and communication protocols.

Theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient for emergency preparedness. Regular training and practice scenarios help staff develop muscle memory and confidence in emergency procedures, reducing the likelihood that they'll become overwhelmed by urgency during actual incidents.

These exercises should simulate realistic conditions and stress levels, including communication challenges and time pressures.

Tabletop exercises allow management teams to work through complex emergency scenarios, testing decision-making processes and identifying potential gaps in procedures. Full-scale drills involving multiple departments and external emergency services can help validate coordination efforts and identify areas for improvement.

PREPAREDNESS: THE KEY TO EMERGENCY PREVENTION

The most effective emergency response is preventing emergencies from occurring. This requires establishing rigorous operational standards for equipment maintenance, employee training and safety compliance. Regular inspection schedules for delivery vehicles, storage facilities and customer installations help identify potential problems before they become emergencies.

Standard operating procedures should address proper handling techniques for different types of propane containers, appropriate personal protective equipment for various tasks and clear guidelines for when to stop work and seek assistance. These procedures must be regularly updated based on incident reports, regulatory changes and industry best practices.

When emergencies do occur, predetermined response procedures ensure consistent, effective action. These procedures should address immediate safety measures, notification requirements, resource mobilization and recovery operations. Clear decision trees help employees determine appropriate responses based on specific circumstances and severity levels. Emergency response procedures must include provisions for working with local emergency services, including fire departments, police and emergency medical services. This includes providing these agencies with detailed information about propane hazards, facility layouts and available resources.

Comprehensive documentation of all incidents, regardless of severity, provides valuable information for improving emergency procedures and preventing similar occurrences. This documentation should include detailed accounts of what happened, appropriate photos and diagrams, how the emergency was handled, what worked well and what could be improved. Incidents should then be reviewed on a regular basis to see if any changes need to be made in policies and training plans.

Emergency procedures require regular review and updates to remain effective. This includes incorporating lessons learned from reviewing the incidents, changes in regulations, new equipment or technologies, and employee feedback.

Effective emergency operations for propane marketers require a comprehensive approach that combines prevention, preparedness, response and continuous improvement. By establishing clear procedures, providing thorough training and maintaining a culture that prioritizes safety above all else, propane marketers can fulfill their responsibility to protect employees, customers and communities while maintaining operational effectiveness.

The goal is not just regulatory compliance but creating an environment where everyone can go home safely each night, with peace of mind that they've done everything possible to prevent and respond to emergencies effectively.

Remember, in the propane industry, there are no small emergencies — only well-prepared responses that prevent small incidents from becoming major disasters.

Chris McGuire is currently the manager of retail operations for Lakes Gas, after serving as the company's West Division manager. McGuire is responsible for overseeing the company's retail operations and ensuring they meet their objectives. He is also a member of the NPGA Supply and Logistics Committee and Young Professionals Council, where he helps to shape the future of the propane industry.



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THE 4 PHILOSOPHIES OF TECH-ENABLED CUSTOMER SERVICE

Leverage technology to improve the employee experience & elevate service

BY STEPH SCHREYER

Do your employees have the technology they need to provide stellar customer service? Whether your team is frustrated over missing paper tickets or they can't find the data they need to answer customer queries, their stress can actually negatively contribute to your customers' experience and create a self-feeding cycle.

To improve employee engagement and customer service, team members need tools and systems that streamline the customer experience. One of the best ways to do this is adjusting workflows and leveraging technology, making it easier for teams to focus on customers and improving the overall experience. By incorporating technology with the following four philosophies, your team can better service customers, keep operations running smoothly and improve their overall work experience.

PHILOSOPHY 1: ADOPT AN EXPERIENCE-FIRST MINDSET

A company with an experience-first mindset makes it easy for customers to do business with them. A small-scale example of this mindset is offering multiple means of contact for customer queries. This might include off-hours phone numbers, an online portal and other communication tools accessible from a company website.

However, the experience-first mindset must continue when the customer request reaches the company, which is only possible when employees have access to the tools, equipment and technologies they need.

> When companies take care of their employees, the employees are better equipped to take care of customers, & customer interactions remain positive.

This is the cycle of customer experience — when companies take care of their employees, the employees are better equipped to take care of customers, and customer interactions remain positive. For example, larger monitors help back-office employees view more customer data with less scrolling and clicking. Saving a few minutes here and there seems small, but the time savings add up and lead to shorter response times, less stressed employees and happier customers.

PHILOSOPHY 2: MAKE DECISIONS AT THE DECISION POINT

Who has the power to make decisions at your fuel delivery company? Most companies fall into two camps: those that empower employees at all levels to make decisions and those that require escalation before a decision can be made.

Employees need autonomy to make decisions, and often, employees lack this autonomy because technology is being leveraged not as a highway, but as a roadblock.

Consider a customer service representative (CSR) who receives a call asking when a driver will arrive to make a delivery. If the CSR can't access delivery routes or track driver progress in real time, they will need to delay a response until they can get in contact with the dispatchers or the drivers. In this instance, technology has become a roadblock. But if the company's software is integrated and data can sync between devices in the field and the back office, the CSR can access the customer's account in the back-office software and offer an immediate answer.

Similarly, if the company has a backlog of work and a will-call customer makes a delivery request, the CSR can access that data to provide assurances and give an estimated delivery time to the customer. They can even help the customer in the long term by setting up text alerts to notify the will-call customer when tanks hit a certain level, reminding them to put in a delivery request.

PHILOSOPHY 3: STREAMLINE PROCESSES

Using old processes with new technology creates speed bumps that delay and complicate operations. As businesses invest in new tech, their processes have to adapt to ensure seamless operations. But how do you know if your software has outpaced your processes? Analyzing every process one-by-one is unrealistic; the better option is to start small by gauging feedback from decision-makers and tackling low-hanging fruit.

Consider processes that cause the most notable stumbles for team members. Go step-by-step and evaluate whether each step is necessary. Also, determine whether established workarounds are required or if they were enacted for



> Consider processes that cause the most significant stumbles for team members. Go step-by-step & evaluate whether each step is necessary. Also, determine whether established workarounds are required or if they were implemented for systems or strategies that are now outdated.

systems or strategies that are outdated.

Next, figure out which steps can be handled by software automation. Can tickets be digitally transmitted to a handheld device, or do drivers need to pick up a printed stack of tickets from the office each day? Digitizing the ticketing process ensures that paper tickets can't be lost, and it saves time and resources for dispatchers and drivers.

Keep in mind that the over-engineering of processes can be just as much of a roadblock as having no automation in place at all — different processes will require unique degrees of manual oversight. While forms and automation can prevent data loss, it takes a discerning eye — and a human touch — to ensure that processes will leave customers satisfied.

PHILOSOPHY 4: PRIORITIZE CONCERNS

If team members notice issues, do they have the time and capability to address them? If not, they'll likely punt errors forward in a never-ending game of "kick the can" that can snowball into major issues down the line. Every digital process begins with a manual effort.

Usually, this comes in the form of data entry. However, entering the same data multiple times leads to an increased risk of conflicting information. Teams can mitigate this risk by taking advantage of software integration; data such as a customer's address can be entered into one system and automatically pushed out to others. If a customer moves, the address can be updated in the original software, and the change will sync to all connected platforms.

In addition, reports and dashboards can be helpful tools when it comes to





humans reviewing data and identifying anomalies. Contemporary software comes with robust features in these areas, allowing teams to regularly review and analyze data. These reports and dashboards also make it easier for team members to locate and correct errors; some systems notify users of unusual behavior, such as tanks with levels that do not match projected usage.

These tools support the customer-first mindset essential for fuel dealers. After all, teams dedicated to superior customer service are driven to scrutinize data more carefully and flag potential errors before they create larger challenges.

But this philosophy is not just about addressing errors; it's also about enabling the detail and nuance necessary for five-star customer service. Consider a customer whose delivery location is locked behind a gate with a keypad. An account manager can add the gate code and other relevant information to the customer account. Then, delivery drivers can access the information on their devices to ensure seamless delivery and avoid delays.

Similarly, if a customer's house is under construction or if other factors pose problems for smooth deliveries, drivers should be able to apply these notes to the customer account via a mobile device. During future deliveries, drivers can access that information and plan ahead for hiccup-free delivery.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO EMPOWER YOUR TEAM

The impact of empowered employees, advanced technology and satisfied customers is cyclic and self-fulfilling — as one area is enhanced, the others follow suit. This creates exponential growth and leads to a positive impact on customer reviews and the bottom line. However, it requires teams to be equipped with modern tools, transparent processes and supportive leadership.

In an industry as competitive as fuel delivery, happy employees delivering superior customer care can set your business apart. With thoughtful adjustments to workflows and a commitment to continual improvement, you can break cycles of dissatisfaction and establish a legacy of shared success.

Steph Schreyer serves as director of customer experience for Cargas Energy at Cargas, a Pennsylvania-based software company. Over her 20-year career with the company, Schreyer has held roles in sales, support and leadership. In her current position, Schreyer leads the customer experience team and is dedicated to delivering outstanding service to all Cargas customers.









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HIRING FAMILY? READ THIS BEFORE MAKING A DECISION

This 5-question test will help you determine if a family member is the right fit for your propane company

BY KENDALL RAWLS

Have you considered, or are you considering, hiring a relative in your propane business? Hold that thought! Making a family hire can either turbocharge your business or it can jeopardize everything you've worked so hard to build.

Surprisingly, internal conflicts from poorly planned family hires contribute to nearly 60% of family business failures. This article won't be just another discussion on the pros and cons. It will explore real, actionable solutions and cover a robust tool kit designed to ensure that adding family to your workforce actually propels your business forward, not backward.

Dive into these insights and discover strategies that strike the perfect balance between prioritizing family loyalty and business acumen right here, right now.

THE DANGER OF AUTOMATIC ENTRY

With the goal of a multigenerational legacy, many business owners assume their children or in-laws should have a role in the company simply because of their last name. But hiring from obligation rather than qualification can backfire. Here's what's at stake when the wrong family member gets a free pass:

- *Low employee morale:* Your loyal, hardworking employees may resent a

family hire who hasn't earned their place.
- *Operational damage:* A weak leader in a key role can hurt customer service, sales and overall efficiency.
- *Family drama:* If a family member underperforms, how do you handle it? Can you fire them without causing a Thanksgiving meltdown?

The good news? You don't have to rely on gut feelings. There's a proven framework to evaluate whether a family member is an entitled liability or a valuable asset to your business, as well as a way to handle it so it doesn't disrupt family harmony.

THE FAMILY MEMBER EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Before hiring a family member, put them through this five-question test. If they don't pass, think twice before handing them a company truck and a payroll check.

1. Do They Bring Value?
Would you hire them if they weren't related to you? This is the most critical question. Do they have skills, experience or expertise that your business actually needs? Or are you creating a position just to accommodate them?

If you wouldn't hire a stranger with your family member's resume, that's a red flag.

2. Have They Proved Themselves Outside the Business?
Successful multigenerational companies rarely bring family members in straight out of school. They encourage them to work elsewhere first. Why? Because real-world experience:
- Develops a stronger work ethic
- Teaches them how to take direction from nonfamily bosses
- Brings fresh ideas into the company

If they've never held a job outside the family business, ask yourself: Are they here to grow the company or just to claim a position?

3. Are They Willing to Start at the Bottom?
A sense of entitlement is a propane business killer. If your son, daughter or in-law expects a leadership role on day one without earning it, that's a problem. The best way to test their commitment and character? Have them start at the bottom — just like any other employee.

Some of the most successful second- and third-generation propane leaders started by:
- Driving a delivery truck before managing a fleet
- Handling customer service before running sales
- Doing tank installations before leading operations

If they're unwilling to do the same, they're not ready to lead.

4. Do They Align With Your Company's Culture & Values?
Even if they have the skills, do they fit into the team culture? A propane business isn't just about selling fuel — it's about customer relationships, trust and reliability. Family members who feel entitled often resist feedback, causing tension in the workplace. Ask yourself:
- Are they coachable, or do they push back against criticism?
- Do they have the grit to handle the tough side of the job?
- Will they earn the respect of employees and customers?

If the answer isn't a clear yes, they may do more harm than good.

5. What Do Other Employees Think?
Your team often sees the red flags before you do. Employees will quickly notice if a family hire is an asset or a problem. That's why some family businesses conduct anonymous employee surveys to gauge how new hires — especially family members — are perceived. Warning signs include:
- Employees having to "walk on eggshells" around the family member
- Increased complaints about favoritism or unfair treatment
- A drop in team morale after the family member joins

If multiple employees raise concerns, take them seriously before it's too late.

HOW TO HANDLE FAMILY DYNAMICS IN THE WORKPLACE

Even with a solid hiring process, emotions run high when family is involved. Here's how to manage family expectations and avoid conflict.

1. Communicate Expectations Early
If a family member wants to join the business, set clear guidelines from the beginning. Let them know:
- They will be held to the same standards as other employees.
- They may not start in management.
- They must earn respect through hard work, not family status.

2. Keep Business & Family Separate
One of the biggest mistakes family business owners make is letting business disagreements spill over into family relationships. To prevent this:
- Don't discuss business at family gatherings.
- Avoid favoritism or extra perks that aren't offered to nonfamily employees.
- Treat work performance as a business decision, not a personal one.

3. Use Outside Advisers to Make Tough Decisions
If family conflicts arise, a neutral third party — such as a consultant, board member or attorney — can help mediate difficult conversations. This helps take the emotional weight off your shoulders.

4. Set Up a Formal Review Process
Regular performance reviews should apply to all employees, including family members. If they meet expectations, great — treat them the same as anyone else. If they don't, hold them accountable like you would with any other employee.

5. Have an Exit Plan
Not every family hire will work out.

If it becomes clear that a relative is hurting the business, you need a plan to transition them out without damaging family relationships.

To further empower your decision-making, check out other topics this author has tackled to help you wisely manage the complexities of family employment.

Key resources:

- **Managing grandchildren in family businesses:** seekingsuccession.com/managing-grandchildren-in-family-business
- **Tips for hiring in-laws in a family business:** seekingsuccession.com/hiring-in-laws-in-a-family-business
- **Downloadable guide on family dynamics:** seekingsuccession.com/family-business-advisors-family-dynamics
- **Downloadable guide on family governance:** seekingsuccession.com/family-business-advising-family-governance

- Discuss alternative roles that may be a better fit.
- Offer guidance on outside career paths.
- Be honest, but respectful, about why the decision is being made.

BUILDING A LASTING FAMILY ENTERPRISE: GROWTH, SUSTAINABILITY & LONGEVITY

Integrating family into your propane business demands careful consideration to ensure both relational harmony and operational excellence. It's essential to rigorously assess each potential family hire, ensuring they truly add value and align with the unique culture of your enterprise. Effective strategies include setting clear expectations, maintaining professional boundaries and having a robust plan for transitioning family members out if necessary.

Your propane business's success depends on leadership, not loyalty. Hiring family should be a strategic decision, not an emotional one. If a family member brings real value, welcome them aboard. If they don't, you owe it to your company, your employees and your customers to make the tough call.

This effort is not merely about maintaining tradition — it's about forging a robust, sustainable business that supports your family now and secures its future. Embrace the challenge with the right tools and resources.

Kendall Rawls knows and understands the challenges that impact the success of a family-owned business. Her unique perspective comes not only from her educational background but, more importantly, from her experience as a second-generation family member employee of The Rawls Group — Business Succession Planners. For more information, visit seekingsuccession.com or email info@rawlsgroup.com.







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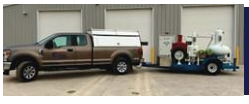
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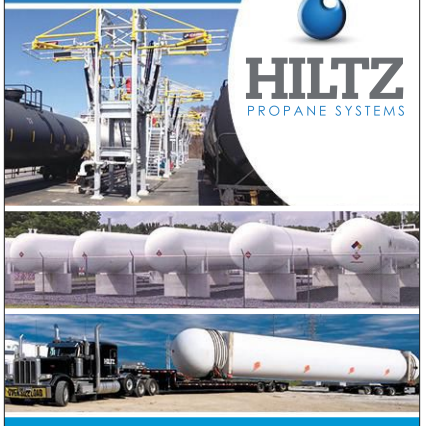
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Bubba Quick

Propane Equipment Sales Manager, *CUI Distribution*



Please describe your current role.
Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana propane equipment sales manager.

Can you describe your involvement in the Alabama Propane Gas Association (APGA)? How did that opportunity come about?
By being in the propane gas industry all my life and being a supplier member with the APGA, I was asked to serve as secretary of the association the first year and rotated to vice president and then to president. My term ended in July.

How did you get your start in the propane industry?
When I was a teenager, I was hired by a local propane company to paint tanks while I was out for the summer in Carthage, Mississippi.

If you could change something in the industry, what would you change?
I have been in the business since the mid-'80s and have seen a lot of changes. Most have been good, so I wouldn't change much.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?
When dealing with propane, be willing to be open-minded and willing to learn something new every day.

Who do you admire in the industry?
There are many that I admire, and it would be hard to name just one.

What qualities make a strong leader?
Be honest and fair with employees and coworkers — clearly seeing where the team/organization should go and inspiring others to move toward it.

When dealing with propane, be willing to be open-minded & willing to learn something new every day.

Describe some of the biggest professional challenges you've experienced over your career.
Being a district manager in the propane industry dealing with employees, collections and keeping margins up.

What's your favorite part of the workday?
Visiting with friends and customers.

What are some of your hobbies outside of work?
Bass fishing and spending time with family and friends — especially grandchildren.

What do you want your legacy to include?
That I was known as the 'Gas Man,' that I was honest and that I loved the propane industry.

What's your funniest and/or favorite work memory?
I was in a stressful managers meeting, and we all were not enjoying the meeting. One manager's ringtone was 'Take This Job and Shove It" by Johnny Paycheck, and his phone rang. We all laughed and the guy speaking said that was perfect timing.

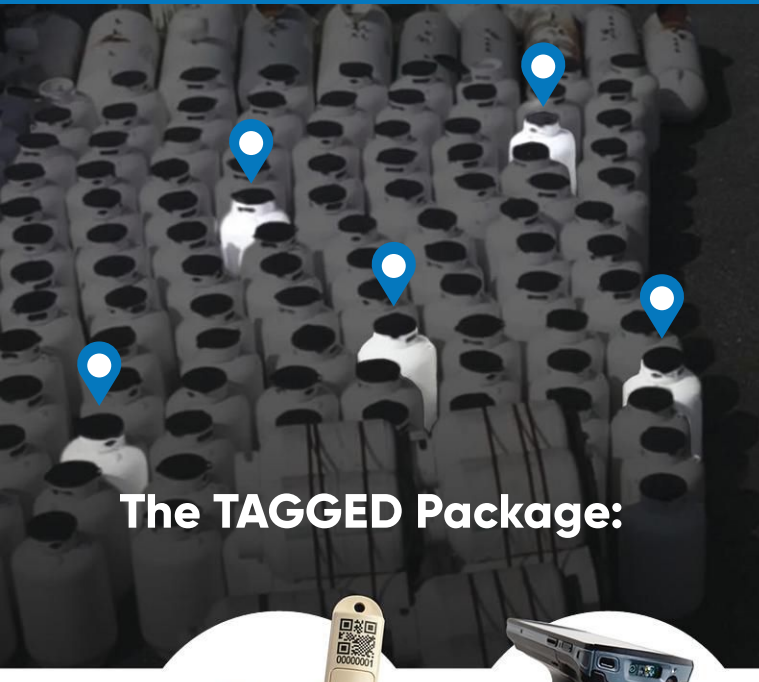
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