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Official Washington has been in vigorous discussions - internally and externally - about alternative fuels and their role in our energy portfolio today and in the future. We are talking about solar, wind, geo-thermal and bio-methane. We are fully engaged in the national discussion about reducing our dependence on foreign oil by replacing the oil we import as our basic transportation fuel with natural gas.

There is another domestic fuel that is part of the alternative fuel mix, but has not been as widely discussed -- and that is propane. It's an important part of the Pickens Plan.

Propane is largely produced as a byproduct of natural gas. Over 97 percent of the propane which is used in America is produced right here on American soil. A brief chemistry lesson: propane is chemically very similar to natural gas but has one additional carbon atom per eight hydrogen atoms which has the benefit of allowing it to become liquified at relatively low pressures for shipping and storing.

Most Americans recognize propane as the fuel for their barbecue. It also provides heat, hot water, and cooking fuel to millions of rural American homes that extend beyond our highly-developed natural gas pipelines.

Since propane is a very portable fuel, it can help replace gasoline in some of the worst polluting engines -- the small engines used for garden equipment, lawnmowers and generators. These small gasoline-powered engines release many times more harmful air emissions per hour of use than the typical automobile. In fact, some cities restrict their use during smog alerts. New propane-powered alternatives are coming to market that will meet federal (and soon, California's) air-quality standards, permitting their continued use even during periods of heavy smog

Propane is also an excellent replacement for home heating oil. The price spikes during the past few winters mean homeowners in the Northeast have had to become "household hedge fund managers" making an annual bet on what the price of heating

oil will be. This, alone, has made propane an excellent choice as a replacement fuel for imported oil.

When you add to that the fact that propane produces 30 percent less greenhouse gas emissions than home heating oil and no particulate emissions, it makes the argument for switching from heating oil to propane even stronger.

All of that is why propane fits into the Pickens Plan so well. The increased use of this clean, domestic fuel is helping us make a dent in our dependence on foreign oil.

In spite of the continuing economic slowdown, we are still importing more than two-thirds of the oil we use. In May, that cost us approximately \$21.6 billion - much of which could have been recycled through the American economy rather than through the economies of countries in the Middle East, Africa and South America.

Increasing our use of propane and natural gas as fuel to power our vehicles and industrial applications means less dependence on foreign oil. As part of our continuing effort to strengthen America's energy independence, I am urging anyone who can - in a residential, a commercial, an agricultural or an industrial setting, to closely investigate shifting from imported oil to propane or natural gas.

Your business or family will benefit, and America will, too