

Getting the lead out

My column this month focuses on avgas, and if you read nothing else, you need to know that I believe:

1. Supplies of 100LL will remain readily available;
2. The GA community is aligned in the search for a fuel without lead;
3. We are embarked on a process that will take a number of years, but must and will lead us to an alternative fuel formulation.

You should also know that I and others at AOPA are fully engaged in this process and that the GA community has not chosen to support any specific solution—and won't until we know more about all the available options.

With a dwindling market for leaded fuel, just one remaining provider of the tetraethyl lead used in avgas, and U.S. policy calling for the removal of lead from fuels, we have to face the fact that 100LL probably won't be around forever. But coming up with an effective, affordable, safe alternative has been no walk in the park, even though researchers have investigated more than 200 possible fuel formulations.

Members of our technical group here at AOPA liken the search for a replacement fuel to a Rubik's Cube—putting one piece of the puzzle where it belongs can knock two or three other pieces out of alignment. When it comes to finding a solution, government, regulators, the GA community, and the petroleum industry have to balance complex interconnected environmental, economic, and technical issues. Trying to deal with each of these issues in isolation is like solving just one side of a Rubik's Cube—it leaves the rest in disarray.

But, as so often happens with complex puzzles, the foundation of the solution is contained in the problem itself. After all, if these considerations must be in balance to create a viable alternative to leaded fuel, then shouldn't we bring the people who best understand each of these concerns together to strike that balance?

What we need is a way to research potential solutions, resolve the unknowns, and better understand how each potential solution will affect production, distribution, the environment, aircraft performance and safety, and the economics of aviation. Only when we have those answers will we be in a position to make good decisions about potential changes to our fuel supply. The ultimate solution must be a fuel that we can rely on for decades to come, just as we have long relied on avgas.

To help find that way forward, numerous aviation and petroleum industry groups have banded together as part of an



AOPA President Craig Fuller flies his Beechcraft Bonanza A36 200 hours a year for business and pleasure.

organization called the General Aviation Avgas Coalition and are developing the Future Avgas Strategy Transition Plan. In addition to AOPA, the members include EAA, GAMA, NATA, and NBAA, as well as the American Petroleum Institute and the National Petrochemical Refiners Association. The members of this group have pledged to work together to find solutions that will keep the general aviation fleet in the air while being affordable, safe, and environmentally sound.

Together, we will evaluate the body of research that has been conducted over the past 20 years, as well as new work now being performed, to find the best possible solution. We are committed to working with the rest of the aviation industry as well as EPA, FAA, and other agencies to make sure we continue to have an adequate supply of avgas in the short term and the best possible solution in the long term.

And we are not the only ones collaborating on this issue. Aircraft owners who fly high-performance airplanes that truly need the extra boost provided by leaded fuel are organizing to represent their interests, as well. These aircraft represent about 30 percent of the GA fleet, but they burn some 70 percent of the avgas used each year.

Recent action by the EPA has made the effort to find an alternative to leaded fuel more urgent than ever. A new advance notice of proposed rulemaking sets out the agency's intent to investigate leaded fuel used in general aviation. This action is intended to provide the EPA with enough information to move to the next step—proposing regulation to reduce lead emissions and implement a transition process.

We will respond in detail and have asked for more time to gather information. An extension was agreed to and now the GA community is preparing comments for the EPA.

We are also asking Congress to approve an administration request for an additional \$2 million within the FAA's 2011 research and development budget—money specifically intended to support the development of an alternative to leaded avgas.

For now, avgas continues to be widely available, and we are working hard to make sure it stays that way until the right solution can be found and implemented. So, while we are very busy behind the scenes on this issue, don't expect to see any immediate changes. It's still far too early to decide how to replace leaded avgas. Together with our partners in government, science, and industry, I do believe we can find a workable solution. And, rest assured, AOPA will make certain everyone concerned takes the needs of the entire general aviation community into account at every step along the way.

AOPA

E-mail AOPA President Craig Fuller at craig@aopa.org.