

June 24, 2010

Avgas Search: Damage Control

By Paul Bertorelli

Over the past week, a curious sort of news coverage has emerged. AOPA aired a video with Craig Fuller explaining the difficulties in finding a replacement for 100LL. The industry's FAST fuel group—really a committee of associations such as AOPA, EAA, GAMA and so forth—held a couple of Webinar briefings, one of which I attended today.

Neither of these had any news value and were essentially summaries of what most of us already know about the avgas search. “We’re working hard, it’s very difficult...no solution yet” and so on. So why did these things appear this week? Consider it part damage control and part counterinsurgency, to borrow a phrase from the current vernacular.

The insurgency is coming in the form of a rapidly coalescing coalition of industry and owner groups whose expensive airplanes are at risk and who have had enough of industry inaction on fuels. They’ve made it clear that they’ll find a direct line to the FAA, or any other agency, to move the fuels problem on to a solution. So the sudden appearance of briefings and videos is a sort of “don’t worry, we’re on it” response for the freckled-necked masses who might get wind of the rebel force.

This is all coming to a head now because Lycoming’s Michael Kraft did something unique in the aviation industry: He spoke in plain, harsh terms and explained that the industry as a whole has been essentially asleep and will be nearly extinct if it doesn’t, at minimum, come up with a highly visible path to a new fuel within months to a year. Continental’s variation on the same theme was to launch its own 94UL initiative to at least force the issue. Kraft said two weeks ago that when owners understand what’s going on here, they are going to demand action. Doublespeak mumblings out of groups like FAST complicate this, as does the lapdog aviation press that basically reports what they say as news without critical examination. (I plead guilty of being in this sorry bunch, but the judge says I may be ready for work release.)

In that context, the industry’s “continuing studies” aren’t going to cut it for Kraft, Continental or the Clean 100-Octane Coalition. What the coalition’s momentum most needs now is a couple of other plain-speaking heavy hitters who aren’t the least bit shy about busting up Power Point drivel to get to the point. Jack Pelton from Cessna comes to mind, and so does Peter Maurer at Diamond. They need to throttle up to full song. They need to pay attention.

If this outside-the-box approach gains traction, it could either bypass the FAST committee’s plodding pace or propel it into forward motion suitable to the task at hand. The latter would be better, because the FAST group has strong expertise and experience. From the outside looking in, what it could most benefit from is plain-spoken, strong leadership with an eye focused more on a fuel that works, and less on playing Ninja-level paddycake with regulatory apparatchiks.

As they learn more about this fuels search business, the 100-octane coalition seems to be undergoing a bit of culture shock. These guys are self-made entrepreneurs who invent things, sell things and basically live by their wits. The Search For a New Fuels empire has been at it for 20 years and has produced essentially nothing but bullet-point briefings, proposals and meetings...a lot of meetings.

One reason for this is slavish adherence to process, and to that grand document of avgas specification, ASTM D910—a simple little sheet that describes what avgas must do, and what it needs to have in it. Great thing. But also the Rosetta Stone of failure, because all of CRC's and FAST's efforts have been hung up on meeting D910, which was written precisely for leaded avgas. That guarantees that only leaded avgas will meet it. In other words, as an intellectual problem solving exercise, they have gotten it exactly backwards for 20 years. The problem is the holy altar upon which the solution is being sacrificed.

What the 100-Octane Coalition would like to do is scrap D910 in favor of a 100-octane gas that, you know, actually works, burns and doesn't detonate. Then write a new spec around that. Oh, and don't take two years doing it, either. As part of this, they want the FAA to stop blocking efforts to approve fuels for test purposes via STC. The Coalition also thinks that the new fuel will have to come from the entrepreneurial sector, not the oil companies and certainly not CRC or FAST, which exist only to evaluate and jolly along the approval process.

With that thought in mind, five months after it came out of the ground with what it claims to be the answer to this problem, GAMI's G100UL has still not been seriously evaluated by any of the primary entities involved in this struggle. (OK, one: GAMA.) No test cell visits, no flight trials. That is just bizarre and also symptomatic of the bumbling effort to find a new fuel.

It's not my job to sell G100UL. I don't know if it's the right stuff or not. But I do know one thing: If I were a member of FAST or CRC, I'd have my ass on an airplane to Ada, Oklahoma to find out.

SATURDAY ADDITION:

It suddenly occurred to me that I should put my money where my mouth is. So I will personally pay the travel expenses for any one member of the CRC or FAST groups to visit GAMI's test cell in Ada, Oklahoma, including the hotel and dinner. If you'd like to keep this secret so that no one finds out you're actually doing genuine investigation on a claimed viable 100LL replacement, I'll honor that.

Any takers can contact me privately via e-mail.