



Decarbonisation – A special series in partnership with **ViGo Bioenergy**

THE BEAUTY OF GAS

DECARBONISATION: **THE OPTIONS** (PART THREE)

Jonny Williams is the straight-talking MD of ViGo Bioenergy. In the latest of our series of articles with the alternative energy provider, we talk net zero, decarbonisation options and the new gold dust sitting in the farmyards...

WORDS: ANDY SALTER



For a relative newcomer to the commercial road freight sector (he joined the biofuels sector from the TV streaming and tech world in 2021) Jonny Williams talks with an understanding and authority on the topic that belies his years in the market. Joining the industry from a different sector has given him an alternative perspective from which to observe the goings on in this market – and he’s confused...

He’s confused with the unwavering focus on electrification of heavy commercial vehicles as the route to net zero when more climate- and wallet-friendly options are available in the tool box. There’s a misplaced assumption, in his opinion, that electric vehicles will simply scale up from car, vans and light trucks to heavy trucks. Consideration should be given to alternatives when looking at the options to decarbonise road freight, he says, particularly ones better suited to long-range, quick turnaround or heavy-duty use cases that electric will struggle to fulfil.

“At Vigo, we’re in the business of decarbonising commercial transport; we’re targeting the heavy-goods vehicle sector,” he explains. “You’re moving a lot of weight over long distances in a low margin business and time is of the absolute necessity. We feel that throwing the combustion engines out [with



Way to go: ViGo Bioenergy MD Jonny Williams has some interesting and different perspectives on the way forward for the biofuels sector

the fossil fuel bathwater] is not the right thing to do when it comes to getting the cheapest decarbonised energy to the axles of the trucks. It seems odd that when biomethane can offer carbon negativity, it’s being ignored, certainly by government, while those who know its benefits, stay with it.”

Williams heads up ViGo UK, owned by Vitol, an energy and commodities trader that many of us will never have heard of. The company is one of the biggest providers of HVO, biomethane and

Photos: ViGo BioEnergy



Good to talk: Jonny Williams and *Commercial Motor* MD Andy Salter discuss the issues

electricity to the UK market, so these comments aren't issued by a climate naysayer, but an observation that will resonate with many truck operators trying to get their heads around the decarbonisation changes ahead.

"We're all in on net zero," Williams continues. "Our critique is that the rhetoric being used in policy making about zero emissions at the tailpipe is misleading, negatively impacting decisions that should be being made on the basis of their respective cost and climate impact as part of the energy transition."

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The transitory nature of other alternatives, compared with electrification, is something often pushed at the biomethane solution. Why invest in a new fuelling method, when the end game is zero-tailpipe emission, the argument goes. However, there are two problems here: the assumption that electrification can cover all use cases – a position that ViGo fundamentally disagrees with; and the fixation on tailpipe emissions (regardless of the carbon content of the electricity) rather than lifecycle emissions.

"We don't have a problem with the term 'transition,'" says Williams. "We have a problem with the fixation on zero emissions. Biomethane can

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have a big impact on carbon emissions, but stays in the rails of profitable operations. Our group of companies, with our customers, has performed a lot of complex modelling around the decarbonisation of heavy trucks and we keep coming back to biomethane. Except for HVO, a more expensive option, no other decarbonised energy offers range, cost and climate impact."

While the focus on electrification of trucks captures all the headlines, there is a lot of good work being done around the world in promoting a broader range of low-carbon solutions, as Williams explains: "It is very easy to critique the government on net zero, but they've put some very effective systems in place on renewables. The Renewable Transport Fuels Obligation (RTFO) underpins the ability for us to invest in all of the infrastructure that is needed for, in our case, the biomethane roll-out. The RTFO is a small levy on fossil fuels to support the development of low-carbon alternatives. We can celebrate what we've already achieved with the RTFO, but let's improve on it."

On the areas of improvement, Williams is optimistic there are opportunities for rapid progress and pinpoints two key areas for UK focus: firstly accepting the GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions

accounting principles, which recognises the carbon intensity reduction (climate impact) potential of different fuel types; and secondly, adopt the European mass-balancing infrastructure regulation, allowing for easy cross-border movement of biomethane – both of which would unlock significant potential for the uptake of biomethane in HGVs.

This works well in Germany, he says: “There is an open market for renewable fuels there which is directly analogous to the carbon savings. You get more carbon-saving credits for biomethane that comes from manure than you would from food waste, and you get more of that for HVO coming from waste oil than you do with HVO made from crop production. This has enabled millions of euros of investment in the supply of a wide array of biofuels. Adopting that would make a significant difference and help the UK attract the biofuels with the largest positive impact for the climate. The UK used to be a leader in regulations in this area. We have an opportunity to reclaim that crown.”

REGULATING THE PROCESS

With regards to the mass-balancing of biomethane across Europe, there is already a well-regulated system in place for managing and verifying the amount of biomethane in the gas grid, giving users the assurance they are contributing to a reduction in carbon emissions, and this is being rolled out further to create an EU-wide mass-balanced grid.

“When the biomethane is injected into the grid, it is metered by third-party system operators, who reliably confirm the quantities at the point of production. This doesn’t necessarily happen for liquid fuels,” he explains. “When we produce biomethane, we know precisely how we make it, we know the quality of it, and because we’re regulated, we know how much we put into the grid.



“The UK should formally recognise the EU infrastructure as a single mass-balancing grid and maybe even link the UK into it. This would reduce the cost of bringing biomethane to the UK and have an impact on prices in the medium term,” Williams continues. “Without it, we’re going to have to add a 15 to 18 euro cents per kg cost, depending on the origin of the gas, every time in the UK.”



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Much of the biomethane ViGo Bioenergy produces is from the anaerobic digestion of farm waste: “Crap is the new gold dust,” Williams says, with a smile. “There is so much waste being under-utilised, which we can turn back into energy. This, to me, is the most compelling argument – all that waste can be turned into methane. We’re essentially just accelerating what Mother Earth did over millions of years previously. As the population grows, the need for food increases, and the output of waste goes with it. This is the beautiful thing; we can use nature to take that waste and create this incredibly high energy density fuel just simply by getting a bunch of bugs to do the work for us.”

As we’ve said in the previous article, ViGo Bioenergy recently partnered with Volvo Trucks to facilitate a shift to LNG (liquefied natural gas) for Uniserve. The trucks are operating on an intensive shift pattern with the vehicles being triple shifted. (see CM 5 June) “We trade in both LNG and CNG,” says Williams. “So we’re ambivalent about which biomethane a customer opts for. In this case, LNG, on account of its energy density delivering improved range and packaging for a 6x2 tractor version, was perfect for the customer.”

ViGo is embarking on an ambitious plan to support the market with a network of refuelling stations in the UK and Europe: “We aim to have about 14 stations by this time next year. We’ve got another 40 across Europe, all working really reliably. We’re investing heavily in infrastructure. At the moment we’ve got more supply than demand. There’s plenty of renewable gas available, we’ve just got to encourage more trucks to run on it.” □