

North Bay

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SONOMA, MARIN AND NAPA COUNTIES

Sonoma Jet Center among first to offer unleaded aviation fuel

The general aviation company will offer the fuel for a six month trial period.

By Eric Gneckow, Business Journal Staff Reporter

SANTA ROSA – Sonoma Jet Center, a private aviation company based in Santa Rosa, has become an early adopter of lead-free fuel for general aviation use, according to the company.

The fuel, known as “ethanol-free 91 octane unleaded gasoline” or “mogas,” is in increasing demand as a more environmentally friendly option for the small aircraft used by company executives and enthusiasts, according to General Manager John Bridi.

Responding to that growing demand, the jet center will make the fuel available alongside current offerings for a six month “trial period,” with the option to expand availability if needed, he said.

As far as we can tell, we can’t find any other airport that’s selling it,” said Mr. Bridi.

While it is difficult to estimate how many aircraft can use the unleaded fuel, Mr. Bridi said that an increasing number of new engines – along with many pre-1970s aircraft – can use it as an alternative to the common “100 low-lead” or “avgas” required by many piston-powered aircraft.

The difficulty, he said, is finding a company that can supply mogas without ethanol – a requirement for engines that can use the fuel. After an exhaustive search, the center entered into an agreement with Fortuna-based Renner Petroleum to maintain a 250-gallon supply of mogas on site.

That supply compares to the 12,000 gallons of leaded avgas that supports most of the 10-20 flights a day from the center, depending on the season. Yet Mr. Bridi said he could see demand climbing in the next few months, noting that the environmental perks of the fuel currently come at a price 65 cents cheaper than the \$6-a-gallon price for avgas at the center.

“It isn’t better or worse in any way – it just depends on the engine,” he said.

The company is currently looking at the potential to add a \$30,000, 1,000-gallon storage tank for mogas, along with a card lock system for its use, said Mr. Bridi.

Lead was phased out as an additive for automotive fuel in the 1980s after findings that even trace amounts can cause cumulative health problems in humans. Levels in the atmosphere have fallen 95 percent since 1980, yet the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that general aviation accounts for the vast majority of remaining lead pollution today. Commercial “jet-A” fuel does not include lead.

As the EPA ramps up its efforts to monitor lead emissions from aviation, Mr. Bridi said he expected the renewed interest to inspire greater demand for the fuel at general aviation centers in the near future.

General demand for fuel has also risen at Sonoma Jet Center, with a 30 percent increase in fuel volume sold in 2011 versus 2010, Mr. Bridi said. 2007 was the last boom year for general aviation, he said, and the industry’s turnaround has been steady but slow through the recession.

Sonoma Jet Center and its 15 to 20 employees are joined by competitors Kaiser Air at the Charles M. Schulz – Sonoma County Airport in providing maintenance, hangar and other services for private aircraft. The company also operates an aircraft sales division and provides refueling services for the airport’s commercial carrier, Horizon Air.