



# DegreeDays

News from the Virginia Propane Gas Association

## Cultivate “Customer Intimacy”

*Successful companies continually customize products and services to meet customer needs.*

By Christopher Caywood, Co-owner of Caywood Propane Gas Inc.



“Customer intimacy” is not about knowing favorite colors or sports teams.

It’s about moving beyond good customer service to continually customize products and services to meet customer needs.

It’s one of three elements of the value disciplines model developed in the 1990s. “Operational excellence,” providing good products at a competitive cost, and “product leadership,” innovating leading products and services, are the other two elements.

Propane marketers who look at their business through the prism of the value disciplines model will quickly realize that product leadership, narrowly defined as propane, is not a strategic option (although renewable propane is an option that is available to the industry).

Many propane marketers pursue operational excellence and focus on keeping their costs as low as possible. The principal risk of this approach is that your profit margin already may be so small that you can’t really reduce your prices any further. It was that risk, along with changes in customers and their needs, that drove us to pursue customer intimacy.

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## 2022 Meetings

### SPRING MEETING

April 3–5, 2022

The George Washington, A Wyndham  
Grand Hotel, Winchester, VA

LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING YOU!



### SUMMER MEETING

July 10–13, 2022

Marriott Virginia Beach Oceanfront,  
Virginia Beach, VA



### FALL MEETING

October 2–4, 2022

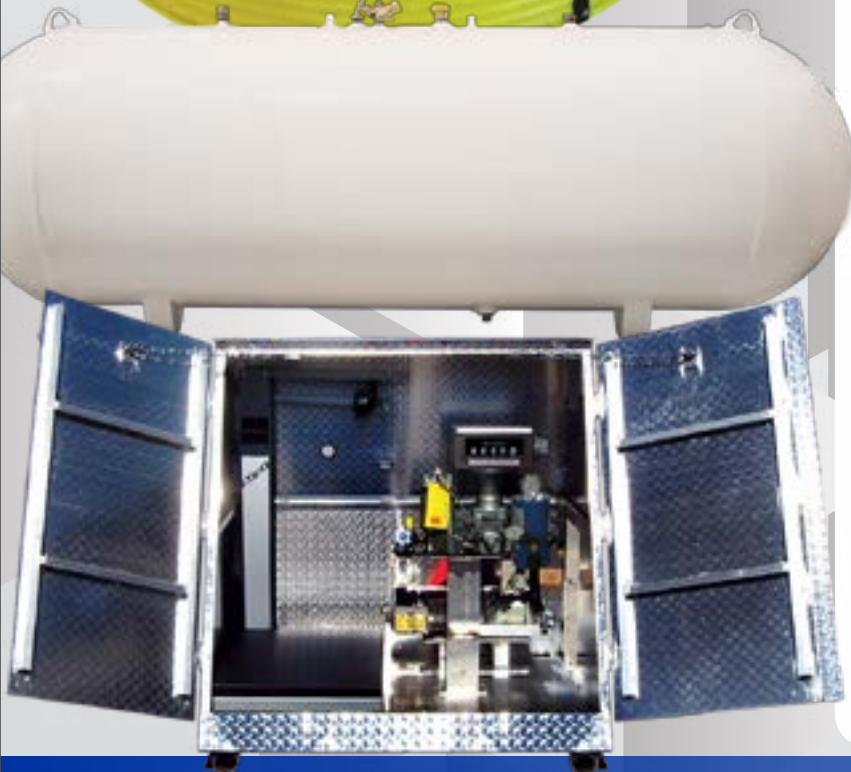
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# | President's Message



## Greetings to all!

I suspect most of you have been fairly pleased with our heating season this past several months. Based on the feedback that I have been receiving, I believe that most folks have been able to adequately cope with the demand and have successfully serviced their many customers.

By the time you read this, Spring will officially be here, and the current Legislative session will have concluded. Right now, we are in the middle of it and it is a time that, I can assure you, your VAPGA dues (and VPAC donations) are hard at work! It is rare that a session concludes with nothing to report from our members' point of view and this session is no exception. While we were not expecting a lot coming into the session, we have had plenty to keep us on our toes and busy. There are Bills that have come up that needed our active involvement to squash them and others that we are trying to support. This is truly akin to the sausage making analogy that we all hear about – you may or may not enjoy the result, but you certainly will be aghast at the ugly process that goes into making it all

## "Your VAPGA dues (and VPAC donations) are hard at work!"

happen. A big shout out to all those who are involved in helping us stay ahead of certain legislative issues. I know Mike O'Connor will enlighten everyone at the Spring Meeting.

Coming up very soon will be our Association's kick off to Spring – our Spring Meeting in Winchester, Virginia this year! I know we are all excited to see this part of the state. I do love moving the meetings around so that everyone gets to have some meetings "in their own backyard" at some time or another. We are blessed to live in such a wonderful state where diverse flora and fauna are abundant. Truly lovely mountains and wonderful beaches are everywhere.

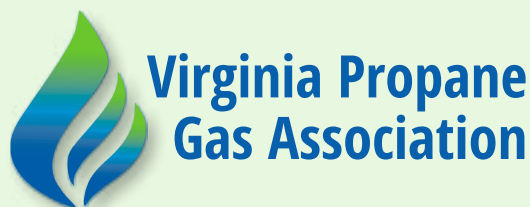
The upcoming Spring Meeting will include a number of speakers who will assist in keeping us all updated on critically important matters directly related to our industry. This will, of course, include an update from our friend Dennis Cruise. It is all part of our commitment to you, our members, to making our meetings relevant and valuable.

Just a reminder that the upcoming General Meeting will also incorporate a vote for a proposed change in our by-Laws focused on membership classifications and their voting rights. I consider it one of my priorities as your new President to get these classifications clarified so that we could streamline our processes, thus allowing Zach Eisenman and his group to quickly and appropriately onboard new members. I appreciate everyone allowing us to get this straightened out and corrected.

In closing, a brief reminder about safety. It is up to all of us, in one way or another, to ensure that our team members and our communities remain safe.

Blessings always,

*Colin Wood-Bradley*  
President



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## Customer needs

How did the customer and her needs change? (That's right – her. Almost two-thirds of our web traffic is female, and women control or influence more than 85 percent of household purchase decisions.)

There was a time when propane retailers had offices that were crowded with customers signing up for service, placing orders or making payments. These old-school customers are still around, as are classic customers who prefer to call you to conduct business. But they are a vanishing breed.

In 2011, about 30 percent of Americans preferred to be contacted by text instead of a phone call. By 2015, that number was over 70 percent, and it's over 75 percent today.

Your customers don't want you to call them, they don't want to call you, and they especially don't want to make a trip to your office. In fact, a recent study shows that almost two-thirds of customers would switch to a company that offers text messaging as a communication tool – unless, of

course, your customer has a question. In that case, over 90 percent of them want to talk to you, and they don't want to wait on hold long to do it.

## Technology meets those needs

We have used technology and technology-enabled data, along with these unmistakable consumer trends, to move beyond good customer service. Here are some examples:

**1** We put a monitor on every company-owned tank, regardless of forecast method. This represented a tremendous cost, but our will-call customers can check their tank levels using our smartphone app, while competitors' customers trek through snow up to their fanny, usually at night and in the cold, to check their tank gauges. Guess which of these images the 21st century customer prefers.

**2** We use email to let will-call customers know it's time to order gas. Our customers are busy, and maybe even distracted by jobs, family, friends and leisure. It's hard to imagine a distraction from propane and propane-powered appliances, but trust me, you can reduce will-call

continued on page 6 >

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## Customer Intimacy, continued from page 5 >

runout rates if you remind your customers they need to order propane before it's too late.

**3** We use text messaging to confirm appointments and send reminders when we are on our way. Using a waitlist, your dentist keeps chairs full even when patients cancel at the last minute. We have stolen your dentist's idea.

**4** We prepare budget proposals for all of our active customers based on their specific usage history and trends. They also get to choose the day of the month for their budget payments. Their pricing includes a price cap, and we put them on auto-fill. We spend only a few hours preparing these custom proposals, and we don't use the word "budget." Participation has increased from a few dozen to hundreds of customers, and far fewer customers run out of propane because they wait too long to place an order because they couldn't afford the large payment.

5. Our app and web portal make us available 24/7. We have seen a noticeable increase in after-hours ordering and payments. We also have noticed a significant increase in customer-executed phone number, forecast method

and payment method changes. And they didn't have to talk to us. Customers also sign up for our price protection programs on their own.

The combined impact of these examples is fewer runouts. We make thousands of deliveries each winter, and so far this winter we can count our runouts on one hand. Nearly 80 percent of our orders are either auto-fill or placed online or with our app. A much higher percentage of payments are made digitally.

The more than 60 percent drop in phone calls driven by this digital shift gives us plenty of time to answer over 80 percent of our phone calls in 20 seconds or less and keep average hold times under one minute, which makes our classic customers very happy. And there are no lines for the old-school customers who still want to come in and place their order.

The best part about customer intimacy is it has reenergized all of us. We already have a long list of potential improvements, including online service scheduling, to make the customer experience even better.

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# NPGA Panel: Cannabis Market Ripe for Development

By Brian Richesson, Editor-in-Chief of *LP Gas Magazine*

The cannabis market is unique – full of promise for propane retailers but complex due to differing state regulations and no federal oversight.

The National Propane Gas Association (NPGA) highlighted the market through a panel discussion at its winter meetings in Palm Springs, California. The panel, moderated by NPGA Regulatory Affairs Manager Twana Aiken, featured Bruce Swiecicki of NPGA, Jeff Stewart of Blue Star Gas and Lezli Engelking, President of the Foundation of Cannabis Unified Standards (FOCUS).

Stewart says a cannabis growing operation can use 10,000 gallons to 25,000 gallons of propane per year for applications such as power generation, hot water heaters, space heating and carbon dioxide generation. But as he points out, the market is high risk and high reward.

"From a marketer's perspective, it can be significant gallons and also a tremendous amount of credit risk," says Stewart, President of Blue Star Gas and Vice Chair of NPGA. "It's the highest risk market we engage in."

Engelking works in the area of voluntary-consensus standards. According to its website, FOCUS involves volunteers from the cannabis industry, regulators, the public and other stakeholders to establish cannabis standards that protect public health, consumer safety and the environment.

She welcomes the propane industry's involvement, saying, "It's critical we understand things from other industries in this space."



*NPGA panel discussing the cannabis market. From left: Jeff Stewart, Twana Aiken, Lezli Engelking and Bruce Swiecicki are part of a panel discussing the cannabis market during the National Propane Gas Association's winter meetings in Palm Springs, California. (Photo by LP Gas staff)*

**"With cultivators in the cannabis industry spending an estimated \$6 billion on energy in 2020, there's a huge need for your industry to get involved."**

With cultivators in the cannabis industry spending an estimated \$6 billion on energy in 2020, Engelking explains, there's "a huge need for your industry to get involved."

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) is developing a standard that covers cannabis growing and processing facilities, with Swiecicki, NPGA's Senior Technical Adviser, and Aiken both serving on the newly created NFPA 420 committee.

NFPA 420 will build upon the work started several years ago in NFPA 1, Fire Code, which addresses the fire

protection aspects of growing and processing facilities, the NFPA says.

The International Fire Code includes a chapter (39) about processing and extraction facilities with no specific mention of cannabis.

Currently, more than half of U.S. states have passed laws legalizing cannabis at some level. NPGA offers a cannabis legalization chart by state on the Member Dashboard section of its website.

The Propane Education & Research Council also offers information about how propane can fuel the needs of growers.

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### Environmental Lobby Shuts Down Senate Consideration of Right to Supply Gas and Propane Legislation

Unfortunately, Virginia will not become the latest state to prohibit government from banning propane and natural gas. At the beginning of the General Assembly session, Delegate Terry Kilgore (R-1st District) introduced House Bill 1257, which was aimed at preventing localities and municipalities from banning natural gas service. Working with the Delegate and other partners, the association was able to add language to the bill to cover both jurisdictional and non-jurisdictional propane. That amended bill passed the House in February.

However, the environmental lobbying community, particularly Clean Virginia and the Virginia League of Conservation Voters, made defeat of HB1257 their #1 priority for the remainder of the session. Combined, the two groups donated over \$6 million to Virginia candidates last year - 98% to members of the Democratic Party.

The environmental groups said that the bills were not needed because gas and propane bans are not under active consideration—despite their attempts earlier in the session to expand the definition of energy efficiency



to include electrification, and during last year's session to mandate electrification of low-income households.

Ultimately, HB1257 was watered down in the Senate to provide that if Richmond, Charlottesville, or Danville choose to stop providing natural gas service, they will provide three years notice and ultimately auction the business to the highest bidder. All references to propane were removed from the bill's language.

Despite this unfortunate outcome on HB1257, I am happy to report that no bills opposed by the association were passed during the 2022 session. To view the list of issues we were lobbying on your behalf, click [here](#).

*Mike O'Connor*  
VAPGA Lobbyist

### Make a PAC Donation Today!



The mission of VAPGA's PAC is to distribute contributions to candidates for the state legislature who, by their acts, demonstrate support of the propane industry and the private enterprise system. Your donations help VAPGA gain visibility and leverage access to promote our industry. Now more than ever, we need your support to combat the electrification and fuel ban efforts that threaten our industry. Please consider making a donation to the PAC today.

If you'd like to make an investment in the future of Virginia's propane industry, contact **Zach Eisenman**, Executive Director, at [zach@eameetings.com](mailto:zach@eameetings.com), or **John Phillips**, VPAC Committee Chair, at [jphillips@peifuels.com](mailto:jphillips@peifuels.com).

In addition to PAC donations, please let us know if you would be interested in hosting and/or meeting with a legislator this fall.

# Scholarship Opportunities

## Young Gassers

The VAPGA Young Gassers Scholarship Application is now live! Deadline for submissions is May 31, 2022. The VAPGA YG Scholarship is offered to current VAPGA members and their dependents who are enrolled full-time in an accredited two- or four-year academic institution or trade school (as of Fall 2022).

Click [here](#) for additional rules and requirements and [here](#) for the scholarship application.

## Brightpoint Community College

VAPGA recently revived its endowed scholarship with Brightpoint Community College, formerly John Tyler Community College, in Chester, VA (outside of Richmond). The endowed scholarship is available to all Brightpoint students, and annual scholarship awards are determined by the Brightpoint Foundation, based on the amount of funds available and the number of students eligible to



receive a scholarship. Preference is given to students who work for a VAPGA member or dependent. The application deadline is April 15. Recipients are notified by July 1. More information, as well as an application, can be found [here](#).

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# 2021 Propane Industry Annual Retail Sales Report

For the past 20 years, the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC) has produced an exclusive annual report on U.S. odorized propane sales by market, region and state. Each year we rely on propane professionals like you to provide the data necessary to portray an accurate picture of the industry's retail sales performance.



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If you have previously shared your company's data for this report, thank you. We know that your time is valuable, and we appreciate your participation. If not, we urge you to do so beginning with the 2021 sales data now being collected. Starting **April 1**, please go to [propane.com/salesreport](https://propane.com/salesreport) and follow the on-screen instructions for completing the report.

Based on feedback from industry members, we have simplified the collection steps and created a secure collection form owned and managed by PERC, rather than a third party. We're confident you will find the process less onerous while maintaining the integrity and confidentiality of your submission.


Individual responses are kept confidential and anonymous. Only summary statistics are presented in the final report, and data is never disclosed to third parties. You can review the 2020 report at [propane.com/salesreport](https://propane.com/salesreport).

If you have any questions about the 2021 Annual Retail Propane Sales Report, please email [salesreport@propane.com](mailto:salesreport@propane.com) or call the PERC office at (202) 452-8975.

Thank you for your participation!



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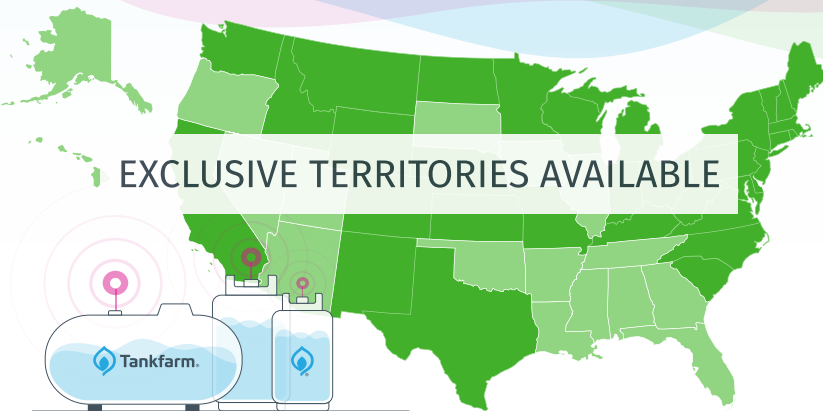
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## Davenport Energy Inc. promotes Harold (Hal) E. Thornton Jr. to President



Davenport Energy Inc., a provider of gasoline, diesel fuel, propane and DEF products, announced the promotion of Harold (Hal) E. Thornton Jr. to President.

"Hal has been a key part of our success, and we are thrilled to promote him to this important position," said Lewis E. Wall Jr., chief executive officer of

Davenport Energy.

Thornton joined the company in 1995 as human resources director and quickly rose to several supervisory and management positions, including his most recent as Executive Vice President.

Thornton was employed by North American Locating Inc. before joining Davenport Energy.

"Davenport Energy Inc. has been my work home for nearly 27 years," he said. "The excitement of watching the company flourish is only matched by the day-to-day honor of being a member of Team Davenport! I am grateful for the opportunities afforded me and look forward to Davenport Energy's continued success."

Thornton has served in a number of industry and community organizations, and is a Sunday school teacher and member of the Church Council of Watson Memorial United Methodist Church in Chatham.

He and his wife, Nina Beth, have a son and daughter, and two grandchildren.

[Davenport Energy](#) is a diversified provider of petroleum products to residential, commercial, industrial, agriculture, and convenience stores across Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia and Tennessee.

## Brian Atwood Joins Rutherford Equipment as Sales and Marketing Manager



Rutherford Equipment, Inc. has announced the hiring of Brian Atwood as Sales and Marketing Manager for the company. Brian will manage overall sales efforts and work with the sales team to grow relationships with current customers and prospects. He will also help coordinate the company's marketing and training

programs as well as nurture vendor relationships and pursue and promote new products.

Brian has over 25 years of industry experience and is active in various industry associations. He is currently the Virginia State Director of the National Propane Gas Association. Brian is also active in state and regional associations. He is on NPGA Benchmarking as well as Head JV Football Coach at Nansemond Suffolk Academy. Brian previously worked as a Regional Sales Manager for Parker Oil in South Hill, Virginia from 2005-2022.

Mike Rutherford, President of Rutherford Equipment, states "I am very excited to announce the addition of Brian to our company. His combination of strong relationship building, industry and product knowledge, and family values will be a huge asset to our company and customers. Brian brings a great understanding of our industry, and the products that we distribute, and possesses relationships that will be valuable for the company going forward. I am ecstatic to have Brian on board to assist in our continued growth!"

[Rutherford Equipment](#) has been supplying high quality gas equipment and consumer products to the propane and hearth/grill industries in the Southeast since 1960. They are headquartered in Covington, GA and have locations in Apopka, FL and Goldsboro, NC.

## Tell Us Your Story!

Do you have any company news to share? Big anniversaries? Success stories? Philanthropic events? We'd like to know! Please send your news to **Zach Eisenman**, Executive Director, at [zach@eameetings.com](mailto:zach@eameetings.com). Your news may be published in a future newsletter.



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# Workforce Development Update



VAPGA leadership has made the decision not to continue its partnership with Vets2Techs and GenerationNext in 2022. We appreciate their work and all of their efforts over the past year to assist our members. However, the Workforce

Development Task Force, led by **Trent Johnson** and **Randy Doyle**, has reached out to the Virginia Values Veterans Program (V3) as a new partner in workforce development. V3 is a program run by the state's Department of Veterans Services. As a state funded program, V3 is completely free to use and enrollment is as easy as 1...2...3!

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Read the Executive Summary [here](#).

Learn more [here](#).

## VAPGA CETP Training We Want To Hear From You!

We are in the process of determining the CETP training schedule and format for 2022. That information will be released to the membership as soon as it is finalized. We encourage members to reach out to **Trent Johnson**, Chair of the Education & Safety Committee and **Dennis Cruise** to make them aware of your needs. Please take a moment to advise the committee of all specific training or safety programs that will deliver the most value to you this year. If you would be willing to host a VAPGA training at your company, please let them know that as well.

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# Comply with Entry Level Driver Training Using NPGA's New ACE Service

Trying to comply with new federal regulations on your new CDL and HME applicants? NPGA can help!

As of February 7, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) requires that all new CDL- and HME- applicants successfully complete classroom and behind-the-wheel training before that are eligible to sit for state CDL or HME exams. This new Entry Level Driver Training (ELDT) requirement applies to all potential commercial drivers.

Worried how you will comply? Here's where NPGA comes in. NPGA's Administrative Compliance Experts (ACE) service can complete the regulatory requirements, filing paperwork and submitting information to the FMCSA. While you focus on your day-to-day business, NPGA's ACE navigates the regulatory red tape. Through ACE, the more than 30 steps mandated by ELDT can become just five simple steps with NPGA guiding you from start to finish.

And using ACE can help your state association! **NPGA is offering a special revenue sharing program for Virginia Propane Gas Association members. Just enter code VA10 at checkout so the association gets 10 percent of your purchase.**

For additional information on ACE, including frequently asked questions, fee structures, and a sample of the educational modules, visit [npga.org/ace](https://npga.org/ace). Questions? Contact ACE at [eldt@npga.org](mailto:eldt@npga.org).

## Focus on the road ahead.



Support your  
state association!  
Use referral code **VA10**



Administrative Compliance Experts  
Find your CDL training program today at  
**[npga.org/ace](https://npga.org/ace)**

## 2022 Rebates



### 2022 REBATES ARE NOW LIVE!

For 2022 we will again be offering  
\$300 Safe Appliance Rebates.  
Vehicle Autogas Rebates  
are TBD at this time.

**[\\$300 Safe Appliance Rebates](#)**

186 remaining

Please contact **Tami Guthrie** at  
[tami@eameetings.com](mailto:tami@eameetings.com) or **804.241.2232**  
for additional information or to request  
an application and pre-approval numbers.

# Phillips Energy Hosts U.S. Congressman Rob Wittman

Last month, Elizabeth McCormick and John Phillips from Phillips Energy hosted United States Congressman Rob Wittman (R-VA) at their facility in Hayes, Virginia. First elected in 2007, Congressman Wittman represents the 1st congressional district, which covers a diverse portion of the Commonwealth, stretching from the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck into the Fredericksburg area and Prince William County. During Congressman Wittman's visit to the facility, Elizabeth and John were able to discuss several topics of note, including supply chain issues, rising inflation, American energy production and the vital role that propane plays in the Commonwealth. Engaging and educating elected officials at the federal, state, and local level is a key component of VAPGA's government affairs efforts.



We thank Elizabeth and John for taking the time to host Congressman Wittman and hope other VAPGA members will consider doing something similar in the future. If you are interested in hosting a facility tour to showcase your business to elected officials, please contact NPGA for more information.

## This is what innovation looks like

### The new ME9000 Series Excela-Wynd Hose Reel

provides increased delivery efficiency and safety while reducing downtime, comp claim injuries and driver fatigue.

#### Other advantages include:

- Auto-wind hose return system
- Variable Speed Control - maintains consistent walking speed
- Adjustable speed to suit driver preference
- Auto-push takes the starting hose pull effort off the driver
- Premium construction & materials - for increased service life and minimal downtime
- Gimbal roller assembly - reduces pulling effort
- Internal gear drive eliminates chain
- Designed for minimal maintenance & ease of serviceability
- Integrated design makes your truck look great!



  
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