

Stockholm is not BEST for congestion charging

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Stockholm, which has long been one of the pioneers in sustainable mobility, has just released a final report into its four-year Bioethanol for Sustainable Transport (BEST) project. The report identifies impressive results. But will recent changes to congestion charging in the Swedish capital put all the good work in jeopardy?

BEST

Bioethanol for Sustainable Transport (BEST) is an international programme to contribute towards a market breakthrough for ethanol vehicles. Swedish capital Stockholm is its coordinating city. According to the *BEST - Promoting Clean Cars* report, the Stockholm project was an unequivocal success. In 2008, sales of clean cars overall grew at a record pace in Sweden. One third of all cars sold in Stockholm and a quarter of all cars sold in Sweden that year, were alternatively fuelled vehicles. Low-CO2 petrol and diesel vehicles also enjoyed record sales in Stockholm and Sweden in 2008.

Catalyst

Eva Sunnerstedt, BEST project leader at the City of Stockholm, Environment and Health Administration, said: "The experience from Stockholm shows that it is possible for a city to influence markets and spread clean vehicle awareness to others. With appropriate support and practical incentives, a city can act as a catalyst with activities that reach beyond its boundaries."

Challenges

One of main successes of the BEST Stockholm project, according to Eva, was convincing the public that vehicles running on ethanol are just as reliable, safe and easy to use as any other car. "They are liked by the drivers, the fleet managers and also by passengers. There's no real difference in operating them and there are no extra technical problems," she said.

But findings show that the fuel price has to be competitive and the infrastructure needs to be in place, and Eva believes there should be tax relief on the alternative fuel.

A key challenge was addressing the negative media debate surrounding ethanol production and getting the message out to the public that harmful production does not exist in Sweden.

BEST appears to have met the challenge with considerable success, with clean vehicles accounting for 32 per cent of car sales in Stockholm by the end of last year. Nationally, at the end of 2008 the share of clean vehicles in the Swedish vehicle stock was approximately five percent. This is a significant share in Sweden, where vehicle turnover is slower than in the US and most European countries.

[F038 Image 1](#)

Heads, hearts and wallets

Eva puts the success down to a combination of heads, hearts and wallets: strong official support at the national and local level to convince the heads, profile raising by both the city authorities and the automotive industry to win the hearts (Ford launched its Focus Flexifuel in Sweden as long ago as 2001), and in particular, tangible financial incentives to convince the wallets. The latter include the introduction of free residential parking in the city, government subsidies for private buyers of clean cars and, most importantly Eva says, exemption from Stockholm's congestion charge, which was introduced in August 2007.

Victim

However, in some ways BEST has become a victim of its own success. Such has the been growth in clean vehicles that the city authorities decided to withdraw the congestion charge exemption at the start of this year for all new clean vehicles, although existing ones will retain their exemption.

"The authorities decided clean vehicles were over-represented in the congestion charging zone. It didn't affect congestion as their numbers are still relatively few, but the authorities obviously didn't like losing so much revenue," said Eva.

Small matter

Unofficial figures suggest that sales of clean vehicles have dropped dramatically in 2009, although of course, there's the small matter of a global recession to take into account as well. Nevertheless, for a city (and country) with such a strong reputation for sustainable transport, it can surely only be seen as a backward step.