

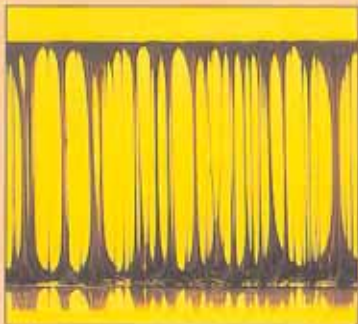
Bitumen production

In this column, bitumen specialist Nynas explains how bitumen is processed.

Nynas bitumen is produced by refining principally Venezuelan crude oil in a process called fractional distillation which takes place in a distillation column.

Crude oil is heated and turned partly to vapour which rises in the atmospheric distillation column. The column is divided internally by horizontal steel trays which are punctured with holes to allow vapour to rise. The vapour loses heat as goes up and its constituent elements condense.

The heaviest condensates fall to the bottom of the column as a liquid which is re-heated in a vacuum distillation column to produce gas oil, distillates and straight run bitumen.



Straight run bitumens are produced in various grades - called penetration grades - measured by their hardness (or resistance to penetration) in tenths of a millimetre (dmm). Nynas produces two optimum grades of penetration bitumen in the distillation columns - hard and soft. Intermediate grades are produced by a sophisticated blending system for those clients that require them.

Penetration and oxidised bitumens are the main products of Nynas. Oxidised bitumens are used in industrial applications such as roofing felt. Further processes produce bitumen emulsion, polymer modified bitumens and other proprietary materials.

Make the best of roads

Anyone who is involved in the transport industry will agree with me when I say that we are facing a watershed in terms of policy development. The new Government seems keen to make its mark on transport early and to give everyone the opportunity to have their say.

I must say that I was impressed with the consultation documents on an integrated transport policy and on the future role for trunk roads in Great Britain. They indicate that the Government takes seriously the difficult issues raised by the increasing demand for transport - issues which my colleagues and I were grappling with when we were in Government - and imply that the Labour Government will approach the task of finding a solution with a genuinely open mind.

However, I have one small nagging doubt - will all this consultation actually lead to anything concrete? We all know that large parts of the road network in the UK are already suffering from heavy congestion at some point during the day. This is not only bad for the environment, it is also bad for the economy. To remain competitive we must see some action now.

I'm not suggesting for one minute that we should embark on a huge programme of road building - times have changed and we all accept that that is not the answer. However, the policies which have perhaps the greatest potential for influencing the demand for travel - land use and planning policies - will not begin to take effect for a number of years. While we are waiting, traffic and congestion will continue to grow.

So we must concentrate on making the most of what we already have. There is a wide range of policies which could help achieve this, for example technical solutions such as the variable speed limits introduced on the M25 and other advanced technologies, and there have been a number of proposals for limiting access to our busiest roads to certain types of traffic at certain times of the day. These should be considered as the Government prepares its White Paper.

But I believe there is one key element which seems to have been overlooked. There is overwhelming evidence that investment in road maintenance and network enhancements represents excellent value for money. Such improvements can help to reduce the number of accidents on a stretch of road, reduce the adverse impact on the local environment and improve access for and the safety of more vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians. And by spending small amounts now, the Government may also avoid the need for more costly improvements at a later stage.

While I understand the reasoning behind the Government's decision to review the roads programme, it must not allow ideology to get in the way of common sense. Where it is clear that improving the road network represents the best solution - and there will be occasions when this is so - the Government must give the go ahead. The country and the economy cannot afford to let the situation get any worse.



Steve Norris.

Steve Norris is Director General of the Road Haulage Association