



Sharon Banks is set to take over Cascade Sierra Solutions, a nonprofit agency that helps truckers save money on fuel and cut pollution.

The pollution buster  
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In November 2004, Sharon Banks put her first super-duper fuel-saving, carbon dioxide-busting power unit on an old long-haul truck.

The next year, Banks - a 16-year employee with the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency - got 100 units installed by extending low-interest loans to mom-and-pop truck owners.

This coming year, Banks expects to install 5,000 pollution-sparing units on long-haul trucks plying the Interstate 5 corridor. She's working at the helm of Cascade Sierra Solutions, a brand-new, tri-state, nonprofit agency with a \$12 million operating budget. That means she'll be responsible for reducing carbon dioxide gas emissions by 220 million pounds and saving 10 million gallons of diesel by the year's end - and the same each year thereafter.

But that's just the beginning.

Banks hopes to equip all 100,000 long-haul trucks that use the I-5 corridor, then take on the remaining 500,000 rigs that crisscross the nation.

The job has consumed her every weekend for the past year. Beginning Saturday it becomes her full-time job as she transitions from being financial and human resources manager of LRAPA into her new role as CEO of the Coburg-based Cascade Sierra

Solutions.

"It's fabulous," she said. "It took me 47 years, but I finally figured out what I was supposed to do."

Banks' passion for ending diesel pollution, her interest in the trucking industry and her talent for writing grants placed her in the right place at the right time to be swept up by greener-trucking history.

In the 1990s, environmentalist and government agencies zeroed in on soot pouring out of diesel engines as a major threat to public health. The engines emit soot coated with carcinogens and pump out 22 pounds of carbon dioxide for every gallon of gas they burn. Scientist found elevated cancer rates in cities where trucks congregate. Soot is implicated in increasing asthma rates in children over the past 20 years.

Banks caught the wave of interest, and though she was in the administrative rather than the technical side of LRAPA, she launched programs that brought low sulfur diesel to Lane County far ahead of federal requirements, helped get emissions-reducing equipment for Eugene and Springfield school buses and got subsidies for large fleets buying cleaner fuels.

"This is my life. This is what I do," Banks said.

She was ready, five years ago, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency launched its SmartWay program to upgrade long-haul trucks with auxiliary power units - similar to those Banks promoted - and other trucking technologies, such as fairings to reduce wind resistance.

The auxiliary power units allow truckers to turn off their main engines while they're sleeping, reducing the fuel they use at rest by 80 percent. The tiny units power their heating, cooling and cooking appliances. Without them, trucks must idle.

The SmartWay program found enthusiastic support because it fit the tenor of the political times in Washington, D.C. It's voluntary and helpful to industry, rather than regulatory or punitive.

By contrast, in California the air board adopted an anti-idling law with a \$500 fine. With the voluntary SmartWay program, major trucking agencies and trade groups climbed on board.

The EPA, however, didn't excel at contacting smaller fleets and mom-and-pop operations, said Bob Russell, president of the Oregon Trucking Association. "Dealing with government is not the easiest thing in the world."

Enter Sharon Banks.

As part of her anti-diesel pollution enthusiasm, she started the Everybody Wins program out of LRAPA, which will have installed 350 auxiliary power units in Oregon-based trucks by the end of this year.

To make her program work, Banks made friends in the trucking industry.

She had a feel for their life. She's in the Oregon National Guard, and as part of her training she attended the Army's transportation school in the early 1990s.

In 1997 and 1998, Banks commanded the guard's Salem-based 1210 Transportation Unit. Most of the unit's soldiers were commercial truck drivers in civilian life.

So Banks was ready to talk to the little guy. She went to truck stops and repair shops.

Now her Cascade Sierra Solutions has plans to open five emerging technology demonstration and sales centers at truck stops on the Interstate 5 corridor at Seattle, Portland, Coburg, Medford, Sacramento and Los Angeles. The centers will be open until

11 p.m. to accommodate truckers' hours.

Banks also found that mom-and-pop operations generally run the oldest, dirtiest trucks, but they lack the upfront cash to invest \$10,000 on the anti-pollution, fuel-saving upgrades - even though they would pay for themselves in less than three years.

Further, loans were scarce.

"There aren't a lot of banks that want to loan to truck drivers even if they have good credit. It just makes them nervous to have an asset that's mobile like that," Banks said. So Banks figured out how LRAPA could buy the units with start-up money from the Oregon Department of Energy and then sell them over time to the truckers. She also figured out how to apply a state tax credit.

"It's really the only way it's feasible for a lot of those folks," Russell of the truckers association said.

"These are little bitty companies. They're one-truck operators. They live in their trucks. They don't have the where- withal."

Three of 200 truckers that had the units installed so far went bankrupt, Banks said. And in each case the agency was able to recover and resell the equipment.

Market forces have helped Banks' program, Russell said. Diesel prices tripled over the past two years. Long-haul trucks average 5 miles to the gallon. "At \$3 a gallon we're doing everything we possibly can to conserve fuel," he said.

Truckers adore Banks: "It's her vision and her hard work that is making this happen," Russell said.

So do federal officials: "Sharon is probably one of the most progressive, forward-thinking women," said Kristin Sipes, formerly of SmartWay and now with the West Coast Diesel Collaborative, a private-public partnership. "She's a superstar."

This week the EPA gave Banks' new agency \$200,000 to set up a tri-state program in Washington, Oregon and California.

The U.S. Department of Transportation and the Oregon Energy Department gave her \$5 million total to loan out to truckers to install the next batch of auxiliary power unit/streamlining packages.

Banks said it's likely that Cascade Sierra can tap into California loan funds to expand the number of trucks upgraded over the next decade.

The goal is to upgrade pre-2007 trucks. Beginning next year, the new models will have to meet strict new federal standards that will cut their emissions by 95 percent.

A half-million older trucks are on the road nationally, each with a life span of 25 years, and fewer than 1 percent of them carry the SmartWay upgrades.

"If it goes really well on the West Coast, we're going to push it nationwide," Banks said.

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