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Oregon business a one-stop shop of clean-air technologies for West Coast trucking industry

by Libby Tucker
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High fuel costs in recent months have prompted long-haul truckers to consider new fuel-saving technologies that reduce idling time and curb air pollution from diesel engine exhaust. But with installation costs of more than \$10,000 per truck, the technologies have not yet been widely adopted.

Now, a new business that provides low-interest financing and one-stop shopping for diesel-saving technologies means Oregon truckers have fewer reasons to remain idle.

Over the next two years, the nonprofit Cascade Sierra Solutions plans to open five technology retail centers near truck stops along the Interstate 5 corridor from Los Angeles to Seattle.

The stores will offer more than 40 fuel-saving products at manufacturers' group-rate discounts and help qualified truckers fill out the paperwork for tax rebates and small business loans to finance the technology upgrades.

"I see the centers as providing an outlet for emerging technologies," said Sharon Banks, founder of Cascade Sierra Solutions and former administrator with the Lane County Regional Air Pollution Authority.

Connecting the dots

The Lane County agency has operated a similar tax incentive program for truckers for the past two years. Banks is expanding the county program into a nonprofit business to access a much larger market - the 100,000 trucks that regularly travel the I-5 corridor.

"It's so difficult for new products to get to market in (the trucking) industry because there's just no place to show it," Banks said. "We're going to bring all the products together under one roof serving the over-the-road market - the long-haul guys who are the hardest to reach."

Funded by a \$200,000 federal Environmental Protection Agency grant, Cascade Sierra Solutions will open its first retail center in November at a truck stop in Coburg, near Eugene.

The company plans to open a second center in July in Sacramento and is working with the Sacramento local government and CalTrans, the state of California's transportation department, to find a site, Banks said.

"Many governments and agencies are offering subsidies for drivers who will put this equipment on their trucks, and it's harder than nails for a driver to figure out where to go to get the money and what he's qualified for," said Jon Gustafson, with Coast Transit Refrigeration, whose Carrier products will be sold

at the new centers.

Cascade Sierra, Gustafson said, "brings all that into one process."

"I think that model should be replicated on every major transportation corridor in the United States," he said.

Contributing to a trend

In 2002, the EPA instituted laws that required truck drivers to rest 10 hours for every 11 hours spent on the road, increasing the amount of time that trucks idle.

Idling heavy-duty diesel trucks, which sit still while the engine runs, significantly contribute to energy use in the United States, consuming up to a gallon of fuel each hour, according to a 2002 EPA report.

Idling trucks also emit 144 grams per hour of nitrous oxide and 8,224 grams per hour of carbon dioxide, known to contribute to global warming.

At least 10 states including California - but not Oregon and Washington - have passed laws limiting the amount of time trucks are allowed to idle in order to curb engine emissions and improve air quality.

California currently limits idling to five consecutive minutes, and starting in 2008 vehicle idling in the state will be banned entirely.

"Our main idea is to reduce emissions, save fuel and slow down climate change," Banks said.

But such regulations have been difficult for long-haul truck drivers that live in their furnished cabs for over 20 days each month. While they rest, drivers run their engines to heat and cool their cabs, cook with a microwave or employ a host of other appliances installed in modern rigs.

Federal and state governments have begun to provide incentives to install idle-reducing technologies in trucks. And many trucking companies that maintain large fleets have already installed such technologies to save on fuel and engine maintenance costs.

But independent owner-operators, which lack the funds to install the expensive equipment, have been slow to adopt the technology.

"What Sharon (Banks) is doing makes so much sense," said Bob Russell, president of the Oregon Trucking Associations. "She's arranged for low-cost loans, grants and other types of things to make it possible for us to get into it. And she focuses a lot on the small companies that couldn't afford some of the technology without the low-cost loans."

Jay and Jane Rohrer know firsthand the benefit of Cascade Sierra's technology programs, which helped them install an auxiliary power unit, a small diesel generator that powers their cab without idling the main engine.

The driving team logs about 18,000 miles on their long-haul truck's regular route, transporting hazardous materials between Portland and Dallas.

Even with the rig's new, top-of-the-line 2006 Caterpillar engine, the truck was hardly efficient, averaging 4.2 miles per gallon of diesel fuel. That translated

into about \$13,000 a month in fuel costs.

The auxiliary power unit has saved them thousands, they said, in fuel costs.

"In 60 days, we used 609 gallons less fuel after the installation" of the auxiliary power unit, said Jay Rohrer, an owner-operator with Chemical Logistics, a trucking company with offices in Portland and Dallas. "That was really shocking to me. We had a huge drop in our idle time, which is wasted fuel and wasted money."