

MotorWeek Transcripts AutoWorld ‘Clean Ports in California’

JOHN DAVIS: When it comes to reducing America’s consumption of petroleum fuels, it’s vitally important for individual drivers to make clean transportation choices, but it’s even more imperative for fleets to make the clean switch too. Here’s one success story that’s sure to have an impact from sea to shining sea.

The ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles are among the busiest in the world. Container ships load and unload here at a rate of one every 90 seconds.

But the never-ending stream of drayage trucks, “yard goats” and long-haul rigs used to transport those containers from the docks to distribution centers, railheads and warehouses – some 16,000 trucks in all – are almost all powered by aging diesel engines with little or no emissions controls.

Recognizing the need for environmental change, both port authorities have recently instituted a Clean Trucks Program, aimed at replacing older, dirtier trucks with new ones powered by clean diesel fuel or preferred alternatives like liquefied natural gas.

Diesel trucks built before 1988 have already been banned from port facilities. All trucks not meeting 2007 federal clean truck emissions standards will pay a Clean Trucks Fee for every container they move and be banned altogether by 2012.

Federal, state and local grants are being used to help truckers, mostly owner/operators in this case, exchange their rigs for clean new ones or in some cases retrofit them to meet new emissions standards.

California Cartage, the largest contract hauler at the port, saw the benefits of making a clean-energy switch.

BOB CURRY, PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA CARTAGE CO.: We, as an industry, we need to do the right things. And we need too clean up the air, and if we’re going to be on this earth for as long as we hope to live, the cleaner the air, the better for all of us.

DAVIS: Curry’s company employs more than 1,200 owner/operator rigs, and has built a strong relationship with his drivers by offering such perks as overnight parking for their rigs.

To encourage his drivers to buy clean trucks, Cal Cartage helps them with grant paperwork, educates drivers on the benefits of LNG, and gives clean trucks preferred treatment when assigning work - a huge perk in slack times.

CURRY: Anything that we can do to help the owner-operator not only make a decent living, but to like these vehicles, we want to do.

DAVIS: And like them they do: The Cal Cartage fleet now includes 5 LNG-powered “yard goats” and nearly 150-short and long-haul on-road LNG trucks, with hundreds more on the way.

Wilson Ascension, an owner-operator for five years, was among the first to sign up for a lease-to-own deal. His payment dropped by hundreds of dollars per month, and he’s also exempt from paying the \$70 per-load fee. But despite the obvious economic benefits, he and many others still had doubts.

WILSON ASCENSION, OWNER/OPERATOR: We were non-believers, we didn’t believe in LNG because it was a new technology, and like anything, you’re afraid – you’re afraid to try something new. But once you started seeing them around, people driving them around, test driving them, you get to know them and then you get educated on LNG, then we started getting more familiar with it. Now I think it’s the most popular truck in Southern California.

DAVIS: Word of mouth has indeed been the best salesman for these clean rigs, and the early success of the Clean Trucks Program is prompting other outfits to clean up their acts too.

The Intermodal Container Transfer Facility, operated by the Union Pacific Railroad, is making plans now to reconfigure its operation and replace its 58 diesel yard trucks with just 2 LNG units. Their rubber-tired diesel cranes will also be retired in favor of electric ones.

The effects of the Clean Trucks Program will not be fully realized for years to come, but it’s important that the effort has begun and has inspired others to take similar action.

ASCENSION: I feel good about myself that we’re doing something positive about the environment, and about our future generations. And I think this is the best fuel that we can have right now, is natural gas.