

Management of vehicle fleets requires control of fuel costs

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Soon after Worley & Obetz Inc. began selling biodiesel fuel and biodiesel-blended heating oil to all of its Lancaster County clients, Rohrer's Quarry, based in Lititz, started running its 65 on-road and off-road vehicles on biodiesel.

"It's been great," said Michael Witman, Rohrer's shop supervisor.

Witman said he wanted to try renewable fuel as soon as he heard it was available because he wants America to become less dependent on foreign oil.

Rohrer's Quarry and other firms around Central Pennsylvania have taken the plunge to reduce their petroleum dependency for the sake of the environment and the country.

But in many cases, it's also for the sake of their vehicle fleets and their bottom line.

Michael Murry, director of High Transits, said the main reason the bridge-building company switched its fleet to biodiesel was to make up for the loss of sulfur in diesel fuel. High Transits is a part of Lancaster County-based High Steel Structures, which transports steel for bridges.

"One of the major issues was the lubrication," Murry said. "We needed something else to lubricate the vehicles. We thought that bio would hit that niche."

And it has, Murry said.

In fact, a comparison study in the company's fleet showed that one group of vehicles operating with biofuel needed fewer repairs than another fleet that wasn't running on biodiesel, he said. Since then, all of the fleets have been running on biodiesel.

With 30 tractors and roughly 40 cranes all usually carrying specialty cargo that requires police escorts, High Transits hasn't noticed a dramatic difference in fuel mileage or cost either, he said.

Dale Bentz, manager of Gleim Environmental Group, a Carlisle-based watershed construction firm, said even when biofuel is more expensive than petroleum, it's still worth it.

The fleet at Gleim has been using biofuel for two years.

"It's the right thing to do at the right time for fuel independence in our country," Bentz said.

And, it just so happens, he said, that anecdotally, the company has noticed that the air quality is different when using biofuels.

"The large equipment does not push out as much black smoke," he said. "It's hard to see air quality. Visually, we can see the reduction in smoke and of different odors."

Seth Obetz, vice chairman of Worley & Obetz, agrees with most of the speculation.

In 2001, his company became one of the first in Pennsylvania to only sell bioheating oil and biodiesel for commercial, consumer and residential use. The business also operates roughly 30 service stations in Lancaster County selling biofuel.

"We took a risk and decided that if you are going to buy from us, you are going to get biofuel," Obetz said. "To date, we've done nothing but gain customers. Not one has left us because of the change."

Every vehicle in the company's fleet also runs on biodiesel, he said.

That is what Shipley Energy in York County hopes to do this year as well. Shipley sells E85 ethanol at two pumping stations — one in York County that has been open a year and another in Mifflin County that began dispensing in December. But it does not use that fuel for its company vehicles, said Bob Astor, wholesale-fuels business manager for Shipley Fuels Marketing.

Shipley does use additives in its fuel to help increase gas mileage by 3.5 percent to 4.5 percent, Astor said.

Shipley, which has 200 vehicles in its fleet, also recently began using a software program that tracks all of its vehicles, so that when a service call is needed, a vehicle that is closest to the call location can be dispatched, saving time and fuel, Astor said.

The company conducts daily maintenance and inspections that include checking for low tire pressure to make sure vehicles run efficiently.

"It doesn't sound like much, but when you have vehicles that are traveling thousands of miles, it adds up," he said.

When it comes to the environment, everything helps, said Richard Farr, executive director of rabbittransit, York's public transportation system. Rabbittransit is the leading user of Shipley's York e85 pumping station.

York's mass-transit agency began using biofuel two years ago in an effort to cut down on air pollution, Farr said. He said the cost per mile is a little more with biofuel.

"(But) you can't put a price tag on air quality," he said.

The transit company's next challenge is finding a way to park buses inside, instead of in a cold parking lot. Parking the buses outside means they have to idle to warm up on cold winter mornings.

"They sit and have to warm up 15 to 20 minutes, and that's a waste of fuel and resources," he said. "We hope to find indoor parking so they aren't exposed to the elements, but that's a long-range plan."