



Daimler Trucks North America
Daimler's eCascadia and the eM2 are two of the first electric semitrucks to hit the highways.

West Coast gears up for electric big rigs

By CASSANDRA PROFITA
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Electric semis are starting to hit the highways, and the West Coast is gearing up for more.

In June, California passed the nation's first electric truck requirements for manufacturers. Meanwhile, utilities are pushing for charging infrastructure all along Interstate 5.

But the industry is still young. Some of the first electric semis to hit the highways are being built at the Daimler Trucks North America headquarters in Portland, and they're still in test mode.

Jason Gray helped assemble the company's first 38 medium- and heavy-duty electric trucks — mostly by hand because the company hasn't started full-scale production yet.

The heavy-duty eCascadia is a class 8 electric trailer — as big as they come — and yet it hardly makes a sound when Gray starts it up for a test drive.

"What you're going to hear now is noises that all other trucks make, but you never get to hear, because the engine's running," he said. "So you're going to hear the air compressor running, the brake valves."

He's excited to see what electrification can do for the garbage truck that roars down his block early in the morning.

"I know when they're coming by and picking up garbage because it is a very loud, obnoxious truck," he said. "Could you imagine an electric garbage truck rolling through your neighborhood? You might hear something dumping in the back of their truck, and then they move on. They're not exactly waking the neighborhood up."

Real-world testing

Bill Bliem, who oversees truck fleets for the logistics company NFI Industries, is one of about a dozen customers who are test driving these trucks across the country.

"The drivers love 'em," Bliem said. "They have nothing but great things to

say about them, how quiet they are, how, you know, they don't come home smelling like diesel."

But there are plenty of problems for Bliem to work out before he can start switching his fleets from diesel to electric. He doesn't know yet how much the first electric semis are going to cost once they're on the market, and there aren't many places to charge them right now.

Then there's the mileage. Daimler's eCascadia can go about 250 miles before it needs to be recharged.

"We average about 300-350 miles round trip, and we think that electric is going to get there," Bliem said. "It's not there yet."

So, Bliem's company is testing Daimler's trucks on shorter routes in Southern California's Inland Empire, where it ships products between warehouses and the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

Bliem says he's hoping to save money on gas and maintenance down the line, and he knows it will give him a competitive advantage with some of his customers to cut his carbon and diesel emissions. But so far, those are all future benefits.

"Right now, there is no financial advantage," Bliem said. "Being a sustainable company is our biggest push for these. We're hoping the financial benefit comes on the back side."

The communities NFI Industries' trucks are driving through in Southern California are living in a cloud of air pollution, according to Anthony Victoria with the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice.

He calls it a "diesel death zone" because lot of the pollution comes from diesel trucks delivering products to distribution warehouses.

"We're considered, in a lot of ways, America's shopping cart," Victoria said. "In our communities, you have high asthma rates, high cancer rates, high diabetes rates, and that could all be attributed to the industry that exists here, the logistics industry."

Victoria's group has

counted more than a thousand diesel trucks an hour passing through largely Latino neighborhoods.

"That accumulates over time and it gets people really sick," he said. "And a lot of it unfortunately — it's environmental racism."

To address the air pollution problem in Southern California, the regional air quality agency teamed up with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to offer Daimler a \$16 million grant to build a fleet of electric trucks for test driving in the area.

Controversial requirements

Victoria said California's electric truck mandate could help save lives in his community, and analysis by the California Air Resources Board has found its proposed rule could save \$9 billion in health costs.

Environmental advocates say they're hoping states like Oregon and Washington will adopt the new standard, too, as they've done with California's fuel efficiency standards.

But industry groups say it's too soon for California to pass electric truck mandates for manufacturers, when it's unclear who will buy them and whether there will be enough charging stations to refuel them.

Allen Schaeffer with the Diesel Technology Forum, which represents many of the largest truck manufacturers, including Daimler, criticized the state for moving forward with the rule while the coronavirus pandemic has forced many manufacturers to shut down.

He said new diesel engines and renewable diesel fuel can also dramatically reduce emissions, and those technologies are available now without building new infrastructure.

"There's not a single commercially available heavy duty electric truck in California today," he said. "At this point there's not a commercial market for this technology. And there's not really a huge demand from the trucking industry for it, frankly."

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