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Truckers urged to plug in

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Twenty-four electrical outlets such as this one at Big Boys provide power to keep truckers' gadgets going even with the rigs' diesel engines off.

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BY JOHN MURAWSKI - STAFF WRITER
Tags: business | local | news | transportation

Big rigs rumbling into Big Boys Truck Stop off Interstate 95 now have a novel option: turning off the ignition and saving energy.

As simple as that sounds, silencing the engine for the night is almost unheard of in the world of long-distance trucking. Truckers, who live in their rigs, rely on the truck's engines to power on-board computers, televisions, heaters and air conditioners.

Big Boys, about 35 miles east of Raleigh in Kenly, today becomes only the third truck stop in the state offering the overnight plug-in option. The Johnston County truck stop, which has more than 200 parking spaces, now has 24 outlets for truckers, and charges \$1 per hour.



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Big Boys manager Wendi Powell said the investment has not been considered profitable for most truck stops, but Big Boys wanted to differentiate itself from bigger competitors.

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Shorepower Technologies technician Mark Simila installs an Electrified Parking Space pod at the Big Boys Truck Stop off of I-95 in Kenly on Monday. Big Boys is the third truck stop in North Carolina to offer the pods.
STAFF PHOTOS BY SHAWN ROCCO

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"We have to move toward what the future trends might be," Powell said. "This is the beginning of trying to build a corridor" of electrification stations.

Truck stop electrification has been a long haul for clean-air advocates. Electricity is a bargain over diesel, but most truckers opt for burning fuel -- at last week's cost of about \$2.60 a gallon, the amount a rig uses every hour when parked -- rather than try to run their gadgets and heaters with an extension cord snaking out the window.

But other challenges remain. The biggest may be that some trucking companies have already gone to the expense of fitting auxiliary power units, or APUs, onto their trucks.

Anthony Stallings, who drives for Bill Patterson Co., said his company is considering adding the portable units. While refueling at Big Boys on Monday, he said the electrification stations sounded like a good idea but maybe weren't practical enough for his needs. "With an APU, you can park anywhere," he explained.

It took the N.C. Solar Center, which helped finance the project at Big Boys, nearly three years to find a truck stop willing to put in a basic electrification station for about \$180,000.

Still, advocates are counting on \$22.2 million in federal stimulus money to give the stations a much-needed boost. The money is being administered by Cascade Sierra Solutions, a nonprofit in Oregon that expects the money to pay for 50 electrification stations.

Slow to build buzz

This state's first electrification station was set up five years ago at a truck stop in Mebane. A fourth is scheduled to begin operating later this month in Rowan County at a cost of about \$700,000 for 44 plug-in spaces, largely subsidized with federal money, said Jason Wager, the project coordinator for the Centralina Council of Governments based in Charlotte.

Nationwide, there are only 139 truck stop electrification projects, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. There are about 2,000 full-service truck stops in the country.

The Big Boys project will be the nation's sixth truck stop electrification station operated by ShorePower Technologies, of Utica, N.Y. Shorepower expects to receive \$8.7 million in stimulus funds, but the Johnston County project is mostly covered by state Department of Transportation money administered by the Solar Center.

For years, one stumbling block to electrification was that trucks couldn't easily use outside electricity. Only in the past few years have manufacturers offered factory-installed wiring and equipment to allow drivers to use electricity rather than diesel. Drivers also can retrofit their trucks for about \$3,000. The stimulus portion for electrification includes money for rebates up to 25 percent of the cost of the retrofit.

"We feel it's like the RVs," said Joe Licari, director of East Coast operations for Shore Power. "Years ago, they had on-board gas appliances. Today, they pull into an RV park and have electric pedestals."

To overcome the problem, some electrification stations rent heating and air-conditioning equipment. Licari said he knows of a trucker who travels with a household window AC unit and attaches it to the side of his cab window every night.

The station in Rowan County will rent heating and cooling equipment at a cost not to exceed the price of diesel fuel, Wager said. Big Boys has yet to solve that problem.

"It may be offered free if you fuel here," Powell said. "We haven't gotten to that yet."

Staff writer Shawn Rocco contributed to this report.

john.murawski@newsobserver.com or 919-829-8932

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