

By Mark Wineka

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Rowan County took an electrifying step into the future Tuesday afternoon at The Derrick **Truck Stop** off Interstate 85.

The Environmental Protection Agency's top man, Mike Leavitt, presented the Centralina Council of Governments with a \$100,000 check to help establish a **truck stop** electrification site at The Derrick.

When it's up and running, truck drivers won't be -- running their diesel engines, that is.

An electrification site allows a driver to shut off his engine and plug into whatever he needs to stay comfortably inside his rig.

By not idling for hours, the driver saves money. The cost of electricity is about half of what he would pay in diesel fuel and wear and tear on his truck.

He sleeps better, making him a safer driver when he gets back on the road. There's no rumble or vibration from an idling truck.

The driver has everything he might need at his fingertips: electrical outlets inside and outside the cab, satellite TV connections with on-demand movies, a built-in computer with wireless Internet, telephone jacks, ports for keyboards and mice, filtered central heating and air and a credit card reader to pay for it all.

But the biggest benefit to those assembled Tuesday afternoon in The Derrick parking lot was what truck electrification stops mean for the environment.

The Rowan County site will reduce pollution in a county rated worst in the state for its air quality.

Nationwide, extended truck idling contributes 11 million tons of carbon dioxide, 180,000 tons of nitrogen oxides and 5,000 tons of particulate matter to the atmosphere. It's an unhealthy, sometimes deadly mix.

Idling long-haul trucks consume more than a billion gallons of fuel a year, costing \$2 billion.

Leavitt pulled a strand of hair from his head Tuesday to illustrate that particulate matter that imbeds itself into lungs and causes respiratory problems for millions is just one-thirtieth the size of that hair.

Taking steps to reduce the amount of particulate matter leads to longer, healthier, more productive lives and a better community, Leavitt said.

The \$100,000 EPA grant -- it's believed an installation of 50 spaces will cost about \$900,000 total -- is part of a new SmartWay Transport Partnership, a national voluntary program that partners with the freight industry to reduce pollution.

A long-term SmartWay strategy is to establish national transportation "idle-free corridors."

For now only an I-85 **truck stop** in Mebane is an electrification site in North Carolina. The next closest is Anderson, S.C. Both are operated by IdleAire, based in Knoxville, Tenn.

Representatives of IdleAire, which is expected to bid on The Derrick site, were on hand Tuesday to demonstrate how their touch-screen service modules for trucks operate.

COG will administer the grant. The regional planning agency cooperates with the Sustainable Environment for Quality of Life (SEQL) project, which is an environmental initiative in a 15-county area of North and South Carolina.

Rowan County Commissioner Leda Belk chairs the COG Board of Delegates. She and Rebecca Yarbrough, regional initiatives program administrator for COG, played an instrumental role in identifying The Derrick as a site and winning the EPA grant.

The pair also worked in securing money to retrofit 50 Rowan County school buses to make them more environmentally friendly.

Noting the total Clean Air Initiative under way, Belk said she was proud of Rowan County Tuesday but noted the truck electrification site was "the first step in a long road."

Yarbrough told the Post that Rowan County is becoming a model for the region and nation on how to tackle the air-quality issue.

As for **truck stop** electrification, Duke Power has become part of a project team that will help in expanding the concept to possibly 700 spaces in the state, Yarbrough said.

"It's huge in terms of air-quality benefits," she added. "It's exciting because it's on the ground, and it really makes a difference."

The **truck stop** ceremony attracted several notables besides Leavitt, former three-term governor of Utah. The dignitaries included Bill Ross, secretary of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources; Jimmy Palmer, regional administrator for EPA Region 4 in Atlanta; and Pat McCrory, mayor of Charlotte and a leader in the SEQL project.

McCrory noted that race week in Charlotte will hear the cry of "Start your engines," but the sign of progress at The Derrick will be "Stop your engines."

Bob Craig, owner of The Derrick, said he's actually been waiting for a long time to have a truck electrification site. He told an EPA official it was probably the first time they found something that would benefit them both.

"It's got so many pluses for the drivers," Craig said, adding that it gives cross-country drivers all the amenities of home. "We're just tickled to death."

Craig will earn a commission off the electricity sold by the vendor. He said the electrification site just gives his business one more way to stay out front.

IdleAire has 20 sites up and running now in the country. After four years of research and development, Anderson site manager Jason Metcalf said, the company is ready to have 100 more up and running next year.

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