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Trailing Efficiencies

Making the case for green transition in trailers

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WEST MICHIGAN – As the transportation industry has looked to make the tractor-trailer more fuel efficient, efforts have focused mostly on one end of the equation: the tractor.

But a combination of regulation and a desire for increased fuel economy has transportation companies looking to the trailer as a means to save fuel and money.

Fleet Engineers

Inc. of Muskegon is banking on its Air Slipper trailer side skirts to help transportation companies cut costs. The company is looking to connections in West



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Michigan to help bring awareness of the product to the marketplace.

“The aerodynamics packages have focused on the tractor, the part that punches a hole in the wind,” Walter Hill, sales director for Fleet Engineers, told MiBiz. “Unfortunately we’re finding it punches a hole long enough for the tractor to get through and the rear still experiences considerable drag.”

Drag equals higher fuel costs and as those prices fluctuate, it is enough to create headaches for those in the transportation industry. The side skirts, metal sheets that bolt onto the cross-members of a trailer, show up to 6-percent savings in fuel costs. Additionally, the state of California has mandated trailer skirts to increase fuel efficiency, and as California goes, so goes the industry.



Side skirts from Fleet Engineers of Muskegon have increased fuel efficiency 6 percent for Ever Fresh Transportation of Wyoming, Mich.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FLEET ENGINEERS INC.



Transportation companies were wary of new costs to outfit trailers, but Hill found that Wyoming, Mich.-based **Ever Fresh Transportation** was willing to conduct a trial of the fairings. The trial proved successful enough for the long-haul trucking company, responsible for transportation of fresh product for **Meijer Inc.**, that the company has outfitted 90 percent of its trailers with the fairings, said Joshua Rhodes, safety compliance director for Ever Fresh.

“In the third quarter, we saw a 20,000 gallon drop in fuel consumption over a year ago,” Rhodes said. The fairings are one part of a total package of a comprehensive fuel efficiency program that includes governing all the firm’s tractors to 68 mph, down from 75 mph a decade ago. “You are not going to see illustrious numbers on one thing. Every little piece adds up.”

Ever Fresh proved a valuable partner to Fleet Engineers, Hill said, because of the solid records they maintain. In order to make the case to transportation companies that the side skirts work, Fleet needed solid records to show a return on their investment. The fuel savings of 6 percent fleet-wide earned Ever Fresh the Michigan Clean Transportation 2009 Energy Independence award.

The award caught the attention of Mackenzie Wellman and her father, Ross, owner of **Trailer X-Press Inc.** and **Trailer Equipment Inc.** of Grand Rapids. The 35-year-old company sells, leases and rents tractors and trailers, and Wellman has worked for a year to get the side skirts on the company’s 3,000 trailers. Wellman said the company is looking to an EPA grant to help defray the cost of outfitting 1,000 of its trailers with the side skirts.

There is a considerable amount of education that needs to go on before the company’s sales team feels comfortable with the product enough to convince trucking companies to purchase the skirts, said Wellman, and the company is looking to Fleet Engineers to help educate the sales force after seeing the results Ever Fresh has documented.

“(Side skirts) are an idea that has taken a year to get through,” Wellman explained. “Money is a huge hurdle – companies are having trouble getting access to commercial loans. A year ago we had no clear evidence that they worked, how well they worked, or if they were worth the cost. We are a little ahead of the learning curve. We want to be the leader on this, but new ideas are hard to get through a company. It takes time.” **MiBiz**