

Clean Fleets Truckin' On

JOHN DAVIS: In this edition of MotorWeek we're spending all of our time looking at vehicles that run on alternative fuel, something other than gasoline. Now electric and plug-in cars like the Focus, Leaf, and Volt are attracting a lot of interest from consumers looking to reduce the impact of daily driving on the environment. But, what about companies that share the same goal. They need bigger solutions. Well, that's motivated our FYI reporter Yolanda Vazquez to find out how commercial fleets are solving their bigger EV needs.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: The success of the US Department of Energy's National Clean Fleets Partnership can be seen on the highways and byways of our nation's roads. Fleet partners like Frito-O-Lay, FedEx, Staples and Coca-Cola are working hard to reduce their reliance on imported oil and improve efficiency by merging alternative fuel technology into their fleets. One truck maker that's had a big hand in developing petroleum-free commercial transportation is Smith Electric vehicles in Kansas City, Missouri. This sprawling 80,000 square foot has been transformed into an EV utopia. The production line includes areas you don't typically see like "battery assembly"-- but rest assured workers here are building a world class product.

BRYAN HANSEL: The very first day hired our 8 senior leaders for factory-I said best truck in the world-not best electric truck-best truck in the world-so that's our goal.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: Smith CEO Bryan Hansel says the company's vehicle designs draw upon 80 years of market knowledge. Smith is a well-known name in England where they hand-built all-electric milk delivery trucks for decades.

BRYAN HANSEL: It's a staple in the UK-as a vehicle of choice for dairy delivery for last 50 years.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: They hope to build that same name recognition here in the States with their durable, all-electric Newton classic model. With no engine noise, no tailpipe emissions and a driving range of up to 150 miles on a single charge-- it's the ideal solution for company fleets with predictable delivery routes.

BOB LUCAS: We believe this is the future; there's no doubt. It makes economic sense, it makes environment sense, it just is the right application for this.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: Plant manager Bob Lucas says the vehicles can be up-fitted in a variety of ways including this Newton school bus. Other customizations include assembled lithium ion battery packs based on driving needs. Lucas, who played an integral role in getting the us factory up and running, says the Smith Electric vehicle is a big rolling computer with very few moving parts.

BOB LUCAS: If you compare to a diesel- a diesel mechanical system, the drive train has 1300 moving parts, our vehicle has 9.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: Every aspect of vehicle production is done with meticulous precision. Smith uses a state-of-the-art computer software program that lists work order instructions sequentially--leaving little room for error.

CHRIS SMITH: I've been in this field for almost going on 10 years now working with Atlas Copco system and this is really neat, really excited for this.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: Every Smith vehicle goes through a rigorous-and I mean rigorous--test and validate process to make sure they're safe and roadworthy. When you're building up a brand and putting out a new product, Lucas says it's important to get it right.

BOB LUCAS: We know that we are pioneering this. And we represent not just Smith Electrics-we represent the whole electric vehicles industry and we want to see the electric vehicles industry succeed.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: With more than 300 units manufactured at this Kansas City plant in the past three years, Smith Electric is charged up about their future. In fact, FedEx will soon add Newton's step van to their fleet further promoting the benefits of fleet electrification.

BRYAN HANSEL: When you think about these types of brands, and how important they realize their role is..they do understand and are embracing the fact that we are creating an industry here and they want to take a proactive role in that.

YOLANDA VAZQUEZ: Hansel would like to see more companies jump on the electrified transportation bandwagon. An investment in this type of alternative technology would be a boom to the national clean fleets partnership....and Smith Electric.

BRYAN HANSEL: As a company we're just putting our toe in the water but we happen to have the right customers and we see a very bright future.