

Truck driver Javier Huerta of El Paso, Tex., watches ball games and boxing while staying at IdleAire sites. He seeks out the facilities when he's on the road. ▶

Steel trusses support an overhead system at the IdleAire truck stop in Mebane. ▼



Text and photos by Mark Brumley

KEEPING THOSE **big rig drivers** HAPPY & HEALTHY

At this truck stop they can shut off their engines, surf the Internet, and get a good rest in the quiet comfort of their cabs

Big rigs burn about a gallon of diesel fuel an hour just idling to keep truck drivers comfortable inside their cabs while they stop for mandatory 10-hour rest breaks. At today's prices, that costs a trucker about \$2.25 per hour, not to mention what it costs in polluted air. In a year's time, a single rig can burn more than 2,800 gallons of diesel fuel just idling. Idling has been a common practice for years, but it's rough on engines, drivers, truck owners' profits and the environment. In some states, idling is coming under fire by regulators as a source of pollution and waste.

IdleAire Technologies has built an alternative truck stop system that's spreading around the country and catching on with the trucking industry and governmental air-quality officials. Based in Knoxville, Tenn., IdleAire is partnering with America's largest truck stop chains to build electrified overhead systems that allow drivers to stay in their rigs and enjoy central heating and air conditioning, TV, computer, phone and other amenities without leaving their engines idling.

The first IdleAire facility in North Carolina held its grand opening last October, with 60 slots for trucks just off Interstate 85/40 in Mebane near the Alamance-Orange county line. Located at the Petro truck stop at 500 Buckhorn Road, IdleAire is served by Piedmont Electric Membership Corp., which is headquartered nearby in Hillsborough.

Founded in 2000, IdleAire plans to add about 80 spaces to its Mebane location in the near future as part of an aggressive expansion plan in the southeastern United States and Texas.

"Next year (in 2005) is when we're really going to put in a lot of these," said John Jones, IdleAire's construction supervisor who worked with Piedmont Electric officials on the Mebane site.

"We're on schedule the first part of the year to put in 70 to 75." He calls them "TA's" or Travel Centers of America.

After that, Jones said, IdleAire wants to build 180 more all over the country.

Just like home

Jones said company founder A.C. Wilson, a Tellico Plains, Tenn., contractor, conceived the idea for the IdleAire system after listening to his brother, a truck driver, talk about some challenges he faced on the road. They were on vacation in an RV park, and Wilson sat down that night to sketch the first design for an independent, external system that would give truckers some of the same services available in campgrounds.

To get an idea what an IdleAire facility is like, imagine a drive-in theater or restaurant. But, instead of hanging a speaker or food tray from their windows, drivers get a long yellow tube similar to an HVAC duct inserted into the passenger-side window of their rigs. A plastic adapter, which costs drivers \$10 and is theirs to keep, is fitted into the truck window to install the tubes. The tubes, which are connected to overhead units on a steel truss, deliver heated and cooled air. In the end of each tube is a hatch that

drivers open to find a Service Delivery Module with a touch-screen computer. The computer is the interface for all services, including TV, heating and air conditioning and Internet.

The module consoles have credit card readers that drivers use to pay for services, such as Movie On Demand. The standard service includes 20 TV channels, but drivers can also pay extra and get a premium satellite package. There are USB ports for a keyboard and mouse to use with the computer, as well as outlets where customers can connect their own laptop computer to high-speed Internet service. The IdleAire modules also have phone and power outlets.

Making a stopover at the Mebane IdleAire, truck driver Javier Huerta of El Paso, Tex., said he looks for the facilities, because they make his time on the road more enjoyable. Huerta said he watches ball games and boxing on TV during his breaks, but he can only pick up a few network channels with an aerial antenna.

"When you're a solo driver, you have to park for 10 hours," Huerta said. "You know you're not going to sleep for 10 hours. You'll sleep maybe seven or eight hours. It's nice to have TV to look at."

Huerta said he just wished there were more IdleAire sites. "The only bad thing is that you don't have too many around," he said.

Good for truckers and the air

The additional benefits for society, IdleAire officials say, is that drivers sleep better without the vibrations from their running motors and they don't have to breathe in as many fumes. Well-rested drivers are safer on the road.

Truck owners also save money. IdleAire's basic service costs \$1.25 an hour, whereas diesel fuel is about \$2.25 a gallon. The company said a single rig could save 2,860 gallons of diesel a year by avoiding idling. If all drivers used the 272,000 IdleAire spaces available at truck stops around the country, they could save 1.7 billion gallons of fuel per year, the company estimated.

Burning less diesel helps reduce America's dependence on foreign oil, Jones said. It also improves the environment.

"What we found—we did studies and we also had independent labs come in and do studies—is that the way a smokestack cools everything after so many hours of idling you're spewing almost pure diesel out the top of it," Jones said. "That's where we're really helping, the emissions."

IdleAire's company literature states that a typical diesel rig that is operated the standard 306 days a year spews 55,833 pounds of pollutants annually just from idling. The emissions include carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide. Jones said tests have shown that fumes are reduced by nearly 90 percent at IdleAire sites.

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— John Jones, IdleAire

"Because of what we're doing for the environment, the government's behind us on this thing," Jones said. "The EPA is really big behind us."

In March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency presented IdleAire with a Clean Air Excellence Award.

The EPA recently announced that it would award a \$100,000 grant to help support the construction of another electrified truck stop along I-85 near Salisbury. The Mebane facility was funded out of a \$1.5-million grant from the National Association of State Energy Offices to energy and environmental agencies in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

Besides the environmental benefits, new IdleAire facilities also mean new jobs. The company employs local residents at its sites, which operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The Mebane facility has 13 workers.

"This is a prime example of a project that boosts the economy while improving the environment, said Bill Ross, the secretary of the N.C. Department of Environment & Natural Resources. "Installing electrified parking

spaces at truck stops helps conserve energy and prevent air pollution. Hopefully, we will see many more of these facilities down the road."

Praise for Piedmont EMC

So, Piedmont Electric officials have a lot of reasons to be proud of their involvement in the IdleAire project in Mebane and to look forward to the expansion of the site. As IdleAire grows in North Carolina, other cooperatives will have the opportunity to serve the sites.

"It's a good load for our system," said Bobby Ray, Piedmont Electric's staking technician. "It's a wonderful commercial account."

IdleAire's John Jones said Piedmont Electric was excellent to work with. He said he's overseen the construction of IdleAire sites in many states, and not all electrical utilities have been as responsive as Piedmont Electric.

"Where I have my biggest rubs usually is trying to get the power and the telephone lined up," Jones said. "I can tell you, in dealing with the people out

in California and dealing with Piedmont Electric, it's like night and day. These guys were so cooperative. They were here when they said they would be here. They didn't show up a week later. The level of service we got from Piedmont Electric, we were just tickled to death."

The project, which also involved Piedmont Electric construction supervisor Wallace Wilson, called for the cooperative to install a new power pole and transformer for the IdleAire facility. Workers then ran lines about 300 feet under the parking lot from the pole to the transformer. IdleAire took care of boring the underground tunnels. Piedmont Electric officials said that's just one example of how IdleAire's advance planning and organization made the company a pleasure to work with. Not all builders are that efficient, they said.

"It worked good for both of us," said Walter Parker, Piedmont Electric's engineering supervisor for customer service. "These guys came on board and they had their stuff together."

Mark Brumley lives in Asheboro and is a regular contributor to Carolina Country.