

Flex-fuel kits offer green alternative to gasoline

By Steve Porter

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GREELEY - A Greeley AAMCO Transmission Center is about to become the first outlet in Colorado to offer installation of an Environmental Protection Agency-certified flex-fuel conversion kit.

Don Gaiti, who co-owns the AAMCO Transmission Center at 2445 W. 29th St. with his son, Mike Antonucci, said he's partnered with Chicago-based Flex Fuel US to offer installation of the kits at 800 AAMCO centers across the nation.

"I'd been looking for ways to get our center more positioned for the green movement and how we could do our part, and came across these flex-fuel conversion kits," he said.

Gaiti said he contacted Flex Fuel US and AAMCO officials and soon a deal was struck to let AAMCO be the exclusive installation point for the kits.

"In about a week, I'd married AAMCO and Flex Fuel to each other," he said.

Gaiti said the kits, which received EPA certification Oct. 3, are getting their first installation in Chicago police cars as part of a demonstration project for fleet acceptance. "That'll be the first major test of the kits," he said. "We're looking for a major Colorado fleet to say let's test it here."

The first kits are specifically designed for use by 2006 Ford Crown Victorias, Lincoln Town Cars and Mercury Grand Marquis, which are frequently the vehicles of choice for fleet operations. Other kits designed for other specific engines will follow, Gaiti said.

Mitch Sremac, CEO of Flex Fuel US, said the Flex-Box Smart Kit, as it's being marketed, will be available later to individual consumers wanting to be able to fill up with E-85, an 85 percent ethanol fuel that only factory-built flex-fuel vehicles can use now.

"We're the only people who can legally do this," Sremac said, adding that the company expects to offer more kits for more car models in early spring or summer 2008. "We wanted to roll it out slowly, and we figured we'd hit the fleet market first."

Sremac said he has high hopes for the initial 20-car Chicago police demonstration project. If all goes well, the entire 2,500-vehicle police fleet will be converted to flex-fuel systems.

"We think that's what will really propel us nationally," he said.

Good mileage claimed. According to the Flex Fuel US Web site - www.flexfuelus.com - the bolt-on Flex-Box Smart Kit continuously monitors engine and emission controls, resulting in EPA tests that showed 16.9 mpg in city driving and 26.8 mpg in highway conditions.

Sremac said the EPA certification means installation of a conversion kit on any of the three car models won't void the vehicle's warranty. "That's exactly the value of it," he said, adding that Flex Fuel US also puts its own 24-month warranty on the device.

Teaming up with AAMCO was exactly what Flex Fuel US had hoped to do, Sremac said. "AAMCO is our preferred dealer-installer nationwide," he said. "They wanted to be the first ones out there, and we wanted a good, strong dealer-installer involved. Plus, they work with a lot of fleets."

Sremac said establishing trust with consumers is an essential part of the kit's marketing to fleets and eventually the public. "We wanted to make sure that when you go to buy our product, you know the installer is going to be trained."

The kits are touted as a way to go "green" by reducing greenhouse gases from fossil fuel and also offer increased horsepower, reduced dependence on foreign oil and money saved at the pump. A gallon of E-85 generally sells for at least 50 cents and up to a dollar cheaper than a gallon of unleaded gasoline.

The downside? E-85 is generally regarded as a fuel that gets a few miles less per gallon and is often hard to find. But there are now an estimated 1,200 E-85 stations across the nation and 40 "open or about to open" in Colorado, according to the National Ethanol Vehicle Coalition.

And like a factory-built flex-fuel vehicle, the conversion kit allows an engine to run on either E-85 or pure gasoline.

"If you can't afford to buy a new hybrid, we have the alternative," Gaiti said.

The kits will initially cost about \$1,500 plus installation charges, but that's expected to go down as mass production steps up, he said.

"It's not inexpensive to put one of these in, but over a period of time it will save money," Gaiti said. "If you want to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem, then it's worth it to go green."