

Electric truck stop proposed near Bakersfield would be first of its kind

By John Cox

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A year-old Southern California company proposes to build a truck stop just north of Bakersfield that would be the first public, solar-equipped facility in the state capable of recharging heavy- and medium-duty electric trucks expected to hit the market within a year.

El Segundo-based WattEV said the project's \$10 million-plus initial phase would open a dozen charging bays within two years. Each of its two heaviest-duty chargers would take about half an hour to fully energize a Class-8 truck to carry an 80,000-pound load about 320 miles.

Though open to anyone with even a small electric car to charge, the project would serve WattEV's goal of making zero-emission trucks available to companies open to contracting such vehicles for use but not necessarily buying them.

"Bakersfield is going to be one of many for us, and it's really the proving ground" for truck and battery-charging technology, company CEO Salim Youssefzadeh said.

The project is proposed to be subsidized by grants totaling \$5 million from the California Energy Commission, which sees the proposal as a demonstration of transformative technology for accelerating commercial deployment of electric vehicles with a wide range of hauling capacities.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has thrown its support behind the project. The agency's executive director said in a series of letters to the commission in December that it sees WattEV's project as essential to advancing electric vehicle adoption for heavy- and medium-duty transportation.

"The district recognizes the importance of zero and near zero transportation projects in the valley and the potential for battery electric medium and heavy-duty trucks to create significant reductions in criteria air pollutant emissions," the air district said by email this week. The agency added it may offer WattEV direct financial help as well.

Kern County was chosen for WattEV's first truck stop partly because of the substantial truck traffic running between the Central Valley and ports in Southern California, the company stated. Youssefzadeh said another reason was the availability of a 110-acre property located about two miles north of Merle Haggard Drive along Highway 65.

With battery energy storage, a connection to the state power grid and solar-power generation on site, the project's price tag is eventually expected to reach \$30 million. At that point it is expected to have more than 40 charging bays offering total capacity of more than 20 megawatts.

By 2030 the company aims to power 12,000 heavy-duty electric trucks on California roads. It said it has reserved 50 Tesla Semis and is ordering additional equipment from other manufacturers.

The project's heavy-duty chargers would put out more than 1 megawatt of power, Youssefzadeh said. The site's medium-duty bays would provide 350 kilowatts and the light-duty chargers would deliver 250 megawatts.

Both of the lower-power chargers would be suitable for passenger cars or tractor-trailers with enough time to be charged overnight in exchange for a less expensive charging fee.

WattEV's business model is designed to address what Youssefzadeh sees as a chicken-and-egg problem hampering wider use of electric-powered tractor-trailers. Trucking companies don't want to invest in new electric vehicles until charging infrastructure becomes available, he said, and charging stations aren't being built because there aren't enough vehicles to use them.

The company hopes to overcome that dilemma by offering what he called an all-inclusive solution that will help operators of small fleets make the transition to zero-emission transportation.

As he explained in a news release, this "trucks-as-a-service" model will fast-track the transition to greater use of electric vehicles for hauling purposes.

"Focusing on the revenue and profit potential of an electric truck, rather than the fixed and variable cost of owning a new or used diesel truck, is how we can get more drivers into more electric trucks more quickly," Youssefzadeh said. He added, "Waiting for the market to mature organically — at the rate it's currently going — could take more than a decade."

Editor's note: This story has been revised to more accurately reflect the location of the project and the type of vehicles that would use its most powerful chargers.

Editorial: Leaf blowers and lawn mowers are smog machines. It's time for California regulators to act

By the Times Editorial Board

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Leave aside, for a moment, the usual complaints about leaf blowers and lawn mowers — that their noise and smell are noxious and inescapable in most neighborhoods. There's another, more pressing reason to phase out gas-powered garden equipment: This year, for the first time, leaf blowers, weed whackers, lawn mowers and other devices with small off-road engines are expected to produce more smog-forming emissions than passenger cars.

How is that possible? It's in the numbers — there are more blowers, trimmers and other small engines in California than there are sedans and coupes. And unlike cars, which have gotten cleaner under increasingly stringent emissions standards, garden equipment hasn't been regulated as strictly.

That should change this year. The California Air Resources Board is finalizing a proposed regulation to require all small off-road engines sold in the state to be zero-emission models, starting in 2024. The rule would affect only the sale of new goods, not the operation of existing gas-powered equipment. (Sorry — the noisy neighborhood leaf blower will still be around a while longer, even if the regulation passes.)

The state regulation has been in development for several years. Worried that it might stall again, Assemblyman Marc Berman (D-Menlo Park) and Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez (D-San Diego) have introduced a bill that would prod state air regulators to adopt the rule by next summer and begin phasing out the sale of such gas-powered equipment in 2024, or as soon as it's feasible.

The vast majority of mowers, blowers, trimmers and small chainsaws in California are for residential use. About half of that equipment is already zero-emissions. More than 25 brands sell plug-in or battery-powered models.

However, the proposed regulation and bill are drawing fire from equipment manufacturers, many of which do not currently make zero-emission equipment, and professional landscapers, who still predominantly use gas-powered equipment. There's a long, contentious history over regulating garden equipment in California, including in Los Angeles. The city largely ignored its 1998 ban on gas-powered leaf blowers after gardeners launched a hunger strike outside City Hall in protest.

A lot has changed since then, but gardeners are still reluctant to give up their gas-powered equipment. They argue that the upfront cost of zero-emission models is higher and that it's inconvenient to carry around a bunch of battery packs to keep the equipment running all day. The hesitation is understandable: When battery-powered commercial garden equipment was introduced, it was inferior to gas models. But the technology has gotten much better. Plus, battery-powered equipment is healthier for the user — it's quieter, has less vibration and doesn't choke the operator with gas fumes. And in many regions, commercial landscapers can get financial incentives to trade in their gas equipment for zero-emission models.

The rule wouldn't affect larger pieces of outdoor equipment used in construction and agriculture, which are federally regulated. Manufacturers of small power generators would have until 2028 to develop zero-emission models because the technology isn't quite as advanced.

It's clear that California is moving toward a zero-emission future, and no gas-powered engine should be spared — no matter how small. Let's get moving on cleaner air and, perhaps, quieter garden equipment now.