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Two state of Wyoming agencies to test natural gas vehicles

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CHEYENNE — Rising gasoline prices helped convince the 2011 Wyoming Legislature of the need for the state to consider natural gas-fueled motor vehicles.

As a result, two state agencies this year were authorized to retrofit existing vehicles or to buy new ones capable of running on natural gas or a combination of natural gas and gasoline.

House Bill 235, sponsored by Rep. Jim Roscoe, D-Jackson, allocated \$200,000 for the Wyoming Department of Transportation and the Department of Administration and Information to implement the new program. The law goes into effect July 1.

Roscoe's original bill allocated a total of \$1 million, including \$600,000 to set up a natural gas filling station in Rawlins, and \$400,000 to retrofit state vehicles.

The Senate Appropriations Committee trimmed the total to \$200,000.

The money will pay for 10 motor vehicle conversions each for the two departments.

"I think we learned a lot with the debate," Roscoe said.

Opponents said Wyoming wasn't quite ready for the move to natural gas vehicles.

But then the price of gasoline began to climb while natural gas prices remained stable, and the program became more appealing.

A legislative committee will study the issue before the 2012 session, which should help lead to a stronger bill next time, Roscoe said.

He said his idea was to establish a program like Utah's that could serve the public as well as government.

Wyoming has three compressed natural gas stations in Cheyenne, Evanston and Rock Springs that are open to the public.

Cheyenne Light, Fuel and Power operates the station in Cheyenne while Questar operates the stations in Evanston and Rock Springs.

The state, however, has 55 sites that are not open to the public.

Roscoe wanted a compressed natural gas filling station in Rawlins because of its location along the Interstate 80 corridor and the availability of natural gas in that area.

By placing a refueling option in Rawlins, the largest driving distance to refuel on I-80, between Evanston and Cheyenne, would be 149 miles.

Roscoe's bill was based on a study conducted last year by the Department of Administration and Information's economic analysis division.

The report said that the state motor pool, WYDOT's motor pool and the school districts have a total of 6,715 passenger vehicles.

Of that number only 285 are suitable for conversion.

The report said the natural gas vehicles reduce carbon monoxide emissions by 90 to 97 percent. But their driving range is limited. A Honda hybrid gets 220 miles from a tank of fuel, but the Honda Civic can go 350 miles on a tank of gasoline, the report said.

Bernie Kushnir, WYDOT state equipment manager, said the department currently has three hybrid vehicles.

Kushnir said he is all for moving ahead on natural gas vehicles "but you really need the infrastructure."

In the late 1990s the state purchased some bi-fuel vehicles that used compressed natural gas and gasoline.

The vehicles had two tanks and ran well on compressed natural gas, which burned 99 percent clean.

The state vehicle would leave Cheyenne with full tanks but could only run for 100 to 150 miles on natural gas before switching to gasoline. The driver would then continue on gasoline alone, which defeated the purpose of the program.

Kushnir said the better option is to use natural gas in a bus fleet in one location, like on the 16th Street Mall in Denver.

Chris Boswell, director of the A and I Department, said the program will probably require training one person in the department's motor vehicle pool.

He said it also is likely to include retrofitting existing vehicles rather than purchasing new ones.

Given the limited amount of compressed natural gas fueling stations in the state, the question will be whether to retrofit vehicles that stay within a community, such as Cheyenne or Rock Springs, he said.

Boswell said the energy industry has considerable interest in using natural gas produced in the state. But interest in hybrid motor vehicles rises and declines depending on the price of gasoline.

He has the sense that the alternate fuel-operated vehicles don't quite pay for themselves.

"Yet there's more to this than straight dollars and cents," Boswell added.

"I think the idea is to try it."

The state of Utah, meanwhile, is considered to be one of the most advanced states in the use of natural gas vehicles.

Utah offers tax credits of up to \$2,500 per vehicle, which helps offset the costs of conversion, the A and I report said.