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Amtrak tests hybrid engine

Hopes 'Green Goat' will cut fuel costs, pollution

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A new kind of fuel-efficient locomotive pulled into Amtrak's maintenance facility in Northeast yesterday to begin a 60-day test of the technology.

Amtrak hopes to reduce its fuel bill with the hybrid electric locomotives, which operate on a combination of diesel fuel and batteries.

The locomotives also are designed to reduce harmful emissions around 80 percent and to operate quietly, which would be good news for residents around Union Station and the Amtrak maintenance yard.

"You can be in the cabs of these locomotives and carry on a conversation," said Nigel Horsley, spokesman for RailPower Technologies Corp., manufacturer of the "Green Goat" locomotives.

Amtrak intends to use the Green Goats to pull rail cars and its big diesel locomotives at about 5 mph between Union Station and the maintenance yard just off New York Avenue in Northeast.

They use a relatively small diesel engine and rechargeable lead acid batteries. When the battery charge runs low, the diesel engine switches on to recharge the batteries.

The Vancouver, Canada, company pins its hopes for the hybrid locomotive largely on tougher emissions standards the government is phasing in for railroads nationwide.

Beginning Jan. 1, the Environmental Protection Agency requires that all new or rebuilt locomotives emit 25 percent less harmful pollutants than would be allowed under current standards.

"As the standards have come up, it's made it far more difficult to meet those standards," Mr. Horsley said.

The Green Goats have been used at rail yards in Texas and California, where residents have complained about health hazards from fumes.

Amtrak considers the hybrid locomotives to be a cost-saving venture as much as an environmental courtesy.

"We are interested in reducing our use of fuel," said Amtrak spokesman Cliff Black. "If the reduction of emissions is part of it, we're delighted."

RailPower estimates the Green Goats can cut fuel use by about half compared with most yard locomotives.

Diesel fuel prices have been soaring as the cost of crude oil approaches \$50 a barrel.

The test with the hybrid locomotive represents another effort by Amtrak to reduce expenses as it relies on government subsidies to make up for its persistent annual losses.

Most railroads retire old diesel locomotives for use in their maintenance yards. They sell for about \$1.2 million when they are new.

Amtrak is leasing the hybrid locomotive during the two-month test. It would cost \$750,000 to buy.

"We will gather data and operations experience on the Green Goat during the trial period, and we anticipate it will be sufficient to allow us to determine how the technology might fit our needs," said Amtrak Vice President Ed Walker.

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