Aviation Fuel Hauler Soars Into Automation

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Jim Fox, vice president/general manager

Background

In 2004, senior management at Pinnacle Express decided to carve their niche in the trucking industry by specializing in the delivery of aviation fuel. Since then, business has really taken off for the Ann Arbor, Michigan-based carrier.

Pinnacle today averages 300 deliveries a week to approximately 10 large accounts, with an additional 400 deliveries a year to smaller accounts. Roughly 90 percent of its service takes place in the Great Lakes region of the U.S.

“But we have been expanding our reach more and more to capture as much as we can,” says Jim Fox, vice president and general manager for Pinnacle. “We’ve also been running into the southern states and as far west as Nebraska. Every once in a while we’ll also go out east into places like Maryland and Massachusetts.”

Challenge

Due to the sensitive nature of Pinnacle’s cargo, all of those employees and pieces of equipment have to be ready, willing and able around the clock.

“It’s not like our customers can just pull over with a fuel problem,” adds Fox. “Because of the intense safety culture in aviation, we do a lot of training to make sure the products that are transported are on spec and on time.

“That way when things happen that are not supposed to happen, our customers never have to push start their airplanes.”

Instead, Fox prefers to push his company in the direction of new technology to help ensure his fleet continues to operate at maximum efficiency. He recently employed that philosophy when specing transmissions for a new order of trucks.

Location:
Ann Arbor, Michigan
Segment:
Heavy-haul
Problem:
Jet fuel hauler needs to reduce driver fatigue and find ways to transport diverse payloads from 80,000 - 140,000 pounds
Solution:
Eaton’s UltraShift PLUS® MXP transmissions
Results:
Increase in driver safety and fuel economy
Contact Information:
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Jim Fox, Vice President and General Manager, Pinnacle Express

Solution

That’s also when he decided to jettison manual designs in favor of automation. “My local Freightliner dealer, from whom we have purchased just about every new truck in the last ten years, knows our operation very well and wanted us to take a look at Eaton’s new UltraShift PLUS® transmissions,” recalls Fox. “So we, along with one of our senior drivers, went to Eaton’s proving grounds and test drove some units. “I immediately recognized that the 18-speed was something that we were going to use. It is a very flexible piece of equipment.”

Fox says that flexibility is needed to handle his diverse payloads that run between 80,000 pounds for interstate deliveries and 140,000 pounds for six-axle vehicles running within the state of Michigan.

“The 18-speed solved a lot of issues for our trucks operating between the two different disciplines and allowed us to capture good fuel economy in both applications,” notes Fox. “Now I can have one spec fleet wide that does well in both cases.”

The 18-speed UltraShift PLUS Multipurpose Extreme Performance (MXP) transmissions now in the Pinnacle fleet have no vehicle weight limits. With an overall ratio of 20:1, the transmissions were designed for vehicles required to operate with extremely heavy loads in virtually any on-highway driving environment. It has 18 forward and two reverse speeds.

Result

“With one of the new transmissions that replaced a 13-speed manual, using the same driver over the same route, we are grabbing about 7.2 miles per gallon as opposed to the 5.6 miles per gallon that we were getting before making the conversion,” says Fox. “That is a pretty significant fuel economy gain.”

His drivers are also giving the UltraShift PLUS transmissions high praise. “I suspect that the transmissions will help reduce driver fatigue. We go into Chicago frequently and the automation is a sweet application to have there because you are not constantly having to use the clutch in all of that traffic.”

In an effort to make certain he’s fully capturing the features and benefits of the Eaton transmissions, Fox had his maintenance manager attend Roadranger Academy for special training.

“We have been getting good overall support from Eaton and its Roadranger Network,” adds Fox. “After we made the purchase, they got out here and got us up and running. Eaton also assisted us with some software changes to put the transmissions into an economy setting.”

Currently running two vehicles with UltraShift PLUS transmissions, Fox has another five on order. “It will definitely be our transmission of choice for future new truck orders,” concludes Fox.

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