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...from the  
director's chair

## There actually is a free lunch with fuel economy

It's a mystery to me why saving fuel is still a perplexing prospect for so many folks. It may not be easy, especially after you've picked all the low hanging fruit like aerodynamics, limiting speed, and idle-reduction technologies, but diligence, determination, and a bit of creativity can produce dramatic results. OBAC recently conducted several successful – and thought-provoking – fuel economy seminars in Ontario and the Maritimes. Along with my partner in crime and OBAC's technical and regulatory affairs advisor, Jim Park, I met several groups of drivers and fleet operations personnel and heard first-hand about some of the challenges they're facing.

It was interesting at times with fleet managers and drivers in the same sessions looking at those challenges from different sides of the steering wheel, but the owner/operators in the room were easy to pick out, especially during the Q&A sessions. They seemed the keenest to learn because they had the most to gain. A modest 0.5 mpg improvement at today's prices means an additional \$500 in income. Businesses with 5% profit margins would need an additional \$10,000 in revenue to earn that same \$500. Improving fuel economy is an easy way to improve profitability – but I digress.

The Driving for Dollars program we delivered is based on the e-learning version of SmartDriver for Highway Trucking, developed by Natural Resources Canada (NRCAN) and launched last fall. As a stand-alone learning tool, the online version of SDHT provides drivers with an understanding of fuel saving concepts and it shows how those concepts can be integrated into their work routines. It's free, easy to use, and accessible 24/7 from any computer.

But Jim took the e-learning program a couple of steps further with his knowledge and understanding of today's advanced powertrains, aerodynamic treatments, and ECM data. That's what really got the questions flowing. There was definitely a thirst for more information from everyone

in attendance, whether they were company drivers, owner/ops, or fleet managers, which leads me to conclude that anyone can be a bit muddled about all the potential fuel-saving tools and techniques readily available today.

Part of the problem could be information overload. For example, NRCAN's Web site ([fleet-smart.gc.ca](http://fleet-smart.gc.ca)) is a treasure trove of resources – all manner of programs and tools – but it's a bit like drinking from a fire hose. Add to that a new resource: the US EPA's SmartWay Transport Partnership has recently expanded into Canada, bringing with it even more information, ideas, and tools.

One question we heard over and over was "will such-and-such work for me?" Fleets and owner/operators want to know how well a product works before shelling out those hard-earned dollars. Some SmartWay-certified technologies work better than others do, so the question is a valid one.

Getting past such questions, I was also a bit surprised to discover that some of the fleet reps who joined us, as well as more than a few of the owner/operators, were not up to speed on some of the advantages of today's low-rpm, high-torque engines, and how they can help reduce fuel consumption. Keeping engine rpm to a minimum is an easy way to save fuel, such as when shifting gears and climbing hills, but not many fleets were either practicing it or enforcing it as a fleet policy. I also found it surprising that some fleets and owner/operators who invested in various fuel-saving technologies, like fuel-efficient tires and aerodynamic fitments for trucks and trailers, were not practicing fuel-efficient driving habits – which are basically free.

Often, talk about driving habits led to discussions of driver incentives. Judging by both the buzz at our sessions and the post-seminar surveys, not many fleets have fuel economy in-



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centives in place. One drawback, it seems, is the perceived difficulty of administering programs fairly because of differences in operations from one truck or route to another.

While that's a concern, some carriers have implemented successful programs which measure driver performance not by mpg, but by proper driving habits, like maximizing time in top gear, keeping below a predetermined road speed, minimizing idling, and so on. Some fleet managers balked at incentivizing drivers for proper driving habits, saying that's what they expect from a professional driver.

For them, there's a gem buried in FleetSmart's mesmerizing Web site. It's a nifty tool called 'Driving for Fuel Economy: an Incentive Program Handbook' designed to help fleets create incentive programs that promote fuel-efficient driving. It includes real-life case studies from carriers who have such programs in place, along with practical advice, simple worksheets, and checklists to help fleets get started. If you're not ready to take a drink from the fire hose, you can find PDF versions of the handbook in the Green Trucking section of the Toolbox tab on OBAC's Web site ([obac.ca](http://obac.ca)).

There are so many fuel-saving technologies on the market today, from pricy trailer aerodynamic fittings, to essentially free engine programming features, it's tragic that more of them aren't being used. There's no single silver bullet solution to better fuel economy; it's a combination of technology that suits an application, driver training, and in some cases – really – incentives to encourage drivers to rise above the fleet average. I'm just saying.

This article first appeared in the May 2013 edition of *Truck News* and *Truck West* magazines