

Fuel cell pilot project contributes to alternative fuel research

By Lanorris Askew, Warner Robins Air Force Base Public Affairs

Energy challenges including a growing dependence on energy imports in the U.S. are leading forward thinkers to look for alternative sources to serve the nation's needs.

The Defense Logistics Agency kicked off its fuel cell forklift pilot project July 24 at the agency's Defense Distribution Depot Warner Robins, Ga., or DDWG.

DDWG, in collaboration with the DLA Research and Development program, held the kickoff to introduce the second in a series of pilot projects to demonstrate the use of hydrogen fuel cells in forklifts that move vital supplies daily in support of the war fighter.

Concurrent Technologies Corporation will serve as lead contractor for the two-year demonstration program to retrofit 20 forklifts with hydrogen fuel cells. The hydrogen to power forklifts will be reformed on site from natural gas. A mobile refueling station will also be used to refuel the forklifts for daily warehouse operations.

According to Dan Markiewicz, Concurrent Technologies Corporation director of Advanced Energy Programs, the mobile refueler will be needed due to the dispersed nature of the warehouses where the forklifts operate.

Concurrent Technologies Corporation will team with Air Products and Chemicals, Inc. and Hydrogenics to complete the retrofit process which will

replace traditional batteries.

"One immediate operational benefit will be the elimination of the need to recharge batteries," Markiewicz said.

The traditional time-consuming recharging process meant removing a battery, putting it into a charging station

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manager**

to let it charge, then cooling off after the charge period, and then replacing at the end of the charging period.

As part of the pilot project, that process will be replaced with a much shorter process done by the mobile refueler.

Bob King, DDWG director, said he was glad to see the kickoff day arrive.

"It's been a long journey. This is the catalyst that is allowing DLA and the Air Force to come closer together instead of being two completely separate entities."

Leo Plonsky, DLA Research and Development program manager for hydrogen and fuel cells, called the event gratifying.

"This is an important next step in our nation's evolution towards alternative fuels. There are a lot of technologies out there, but you have to transition them from the laboratory to the warehouse floor. What we're doing is taking technologies that are almost ready for that transition and pumping a little R&D money into it so that we can transition it into something that can be useful to the DOD."

Plonsky said that by helping the facilities here in terms of improving their operations the nation's alternative energy policy is being helped by reducing its dependence on imported fuel and helping the environment.

Air Force Col. Debra Bean, 78th Air Base Wing vice commander, is excited to see the program move forward.

"We all live with the same federal mandates to find an alternative fuel for our transportation. What you are doing here helps us reduce emissions and deal with the environmental challenges of batteries and processing and storage," she said.

"You are doing something that is just far enough on the cutting edge that it gives Robins the reputation of being a leader and a benchmark kind of organization. It's important to our energy strategy that Robins be able to partner with industry, community and academic leaders and projects like these bring these people to our base and make us collectively smarter and better," Bean added.

The vice commander renewed the wing commitment to any resources needed to make the project a reality and said it will certainly pay benefits that will far exceed any contributions made by the wing.