



BLOG: Truck Stop That Received Over \$400,000 in Stimulus Funds Goes Bankrupt

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Just months after obtaining more than \$400,000 in federal stimulus funds, TR Auto Truck Plaza off Interstate-40 in Dandridge, Tenn. sits idle.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) handed out the \$424,000 Environmental Protection Agency stimulus grant for electrical hookups so that truckers wouldn't have to burn diesel fuel while resting. Both the state and EPA were apparently unaware that owner Rick Lewis had a history of legal and financial problems and had filed for bankruptcy.

What was originally lauded as Tennessee's first electrified truck terminal is now boarded up.

"It is Solyndra in miniature," said Rep. Phil Gingrey (R-GA), referring to a Silicon Valley solar panel manufacturer that filed for bankruptcy shortly after receiving a \$535 million loan guarantee from the U.S. Department of Energy. "What I am questioning is the vetting and oversight and the fiduciary responsibility that the federal government -- the people who run these programs -- have to we the taxpayer."

Even before his latest bankruptcy filing, Lewis had a history of financial troubles. He also filed for bankruptcy in 2003, a year after a conviction on 31 counts of theft. And Lewis currently faces indictments for allegedly writing worthless checks, according to court records.

Lewis declined FOX News' request for an interview.

TDOT officials said the Dandridge case was unusual, but has prompted them to improve screening of grant applicants.

"The truck stop electrification technology installed at this location was operating as intended up until a short time ago and can be again if the property resumes operations as a truck stop," TDOT Commissioner John Schroer said in a written statement.

But until the bank can find a buyer for Lewis' truck stop, the electrical hookups remain boarded up. Truckers still use the property to park and idle their engines, which defeats the purpose of the equipment.

"I think the industry as a whole will learn from that," said Mike Fielden, president of IdleAir, one of half a dozen U.S. companies encouraging resting drivers to turn off their engines and plug into electrical power systems at truck stops.

Idling a truck burns approximately one gallon of diesel fuel per hour. Electrified truck facilities allow drivers to sleep in their cabs for a fraction of what it would cost to idle their vehicles or stay in a hotel.

"Our particular service not only offers heat and air and 110 (volt) power," said Debbie McDavid, site manager at IdleAir's facility in Newnan, Ga.. "We also have an Internet browser service and satellite TV."

Although their company was not involved in the Dandridge project, Fielden said there is a place for public investment to speed the deployment of technology that ultimately helps truckers reduce emissions.

"We want them to turn that engine off and save that fuel that we're all so dependent on from foreign sources and use American energy," Fielden said.

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