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Sustainable Business Models with Gradual Transition to Autonomous Trucks, CALSTART and Forth become Catalyst Mobility

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Photo source: Daimler Truck

Truckmakers and fleets are taking autonomous vehicles seriously, nearly as much as they are with electric trucks and alternative fuels. Converting over entirely to self-driving truck fleets won't happening anytime soon, though.

Daimler Trucks has tested electronic truck platooning extensively in Europe, the U.S., and Japan with its FUSO brand. The company later de-emphasized platooning in favor of standalone autonomous driving technology. Competitor truck makers are doing their share of driverless truck testing as well, and companies like Aurora are making autonomous trucks commercially operational on U.S. routes.

Robert Reavis, Director at ButcherJoseph & Co., just talked to *Green Auto Market* about what his firm has been seeing lately with their transport logistics clients through mergers and acquisitions, and with some clients converting over to employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs), or other employee ownership models. ButcherJoseph & Co. is a leading middle-market investment bank specializing in M&A and employee ownership transactions.

Truck operators are taking autonomous vehicles seriously — as they are with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) objectives that could be part of company mandates — but they're usually more concerned about keeping good truck drivers. That may take pay increases and looking at converting over to ESOPs to give these drivers strong incentives for staying onboard. Truck drivers tend to be older than the average American blue collar worker, and keeping them there with a strong retirement and earnings package is making a difference; and it's why many truck operators are going the ESOP route, Reavis said.

Reavis sees the conversion over to autonomous fleets to be similar to what's happening in modern aviation — as a gradual process. SpaceX's Starlink provides satellite internet hardware that is widely used by military and defense developers to remotely pilot drone aircraft. Starlink has been the most prevalent source for operating drones and sometimes autonomous ground vehicles, he said. On the truck fleet side, that might come in the form of flat road, intermediate distance trips making the most sense to gradually bring in autonomous trucks; versus having them in place ready to carry cargo for two-to-three days across the country.

The U.S. Department of Transportation's new national strategy for automated vehicles may be following a similar path. While Elaine Chao, the Secretary of Transportation during the first Trump administration from 2017 to 2021, emphasized fully autonomous vehicles coming to market in the near future, Sean Duffy, the current DOT secretary, is taking a different approach. That includes adding commercial truck regulations, safety standards, and emergency response and interstate data coordination on the federal agenda through fiscal year 2030. Automated vehicles are motor vehicles equipped with technology that can perform part or all of the driving task on a temporary or permanent basis, categorized into six distinct levels of automation — up through full automation including fully autonomous vehicles.

As for accomplishing ESG objectives in truck transport and other industries, Reavis said that for his firm's clients, they tend to be "incrementally interested" in carrying it out. Some of that has to do with what state they're based in — blue versus red states — and where the political climate can take those issues.

It can break down to practical matters as well. Some companies are looking at whether recycling programs are accomplishing their objectives and if they're worth it to continue, he said.

On the M&A side, one major trend in recent years is that the concentration of wealth has grown in the U.S. to millions of families. For them, finding the best strategic plan for their successors is getting a lot more attention now. Employee ownership has become appealing to these truck transport companies as aging owners get ready to retire and hand over a strong and profitable business to their family, he said.

CALSTART and Forth become Catalyst Mobility™: During the Forth Roadmap Conference today, CALSTART's President and CEO, Michael Berube, announced that **CALSTART will rebrand under a new name:** Catalyst Mobility™, effective Sept. 14, 2026. Berube also announced that Forth, a national nonprofit working to advance transportation electrification, will be combining with Catalyst Mobility at the start of 2027. The name of the rebranded firm represents a renewed vision for the nonprofit focused on advancing clean, equitable, and affordable transportation solutions that move all people and goods.

Based in Pasadena, Calif., for more than 30 years CALSTART has been at the forefront of the clean transportation industry, working with industry, government, and community partners to fulfill its mission to change transportation for good. The agency says that after three decades, the organization has evolved and outgrown its old name. Forth has been based in Portland, Ore., and this location will serve as a regional office with its strong footprint in the Pacific Northwest.

Catching up with other countries: Hydrogen Fuel Cell Partnership is **making the case for supporting** hydrogen-powered vehicles as much as European and Asian countries are doing — and that some fleets in the U.S. are already carrying out. Asia and Europe aren't debating whether hydrogen works. They're building production facilities, fueling networks, and manufacturing at volume. South Korea has committed $7 billion to hydrogen infrastructure through 2040. The EU's hydrogen strategy targets 100 megawatts of electrolyzer capacity by 2025. In the U.S., AC Transit, OCTA, and SunLine are running fuel-cell buses on fixed routes every single day. Port terminals in California are moving freight on hydrogen trucks. HFCP says that what's needed is having 200 heavy-duty stations in place by 2035 to support 70,000 fuel cell trucks.

"That's the target. That's also achievable, but only if we move fast and strategically," HFCP says.

GM's EV target: General Motors CEO **Mary Barra says her company is still very serious about electric vehicles** despite slowing US adoption and uncertain political support. Barra projects EVs will account for 40% to 50% of sales by 2030, with gas and hybrid vehicles making up the rest. As for automated vehicles, the GM CEO said the automaker is investing in bringing in great software development staff members and building product management capabilities. The end goal will be to offer continual feature improvements and expand the customer base for services like assisted and autonomous driving.