

Giving nitro a boost

Fargo Company leads push to alternative tire inflation system

[By Craig McEwen](#), The Forum

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Branick Industries of Fargo, 4245 Main Ave., is leading the transition from using compressed air in car tires to nitrogen by being one of the country's leading manufacturers of nitrogen tire inflation systems.

Branick Industries Inc. worker David Berg of Fargo assembles nitrogen tire inflation units at the company's Fargo plant.

Nitrogen isn't just for inflating race car or airplane tires anymore.

The inert, dry gas is starting to replace compressed air as the traditional tire inflation source. Tire industry analysts say nitrogen provides more consistent tire pressure, improved tread life and potentially better fuel mileage.

Helping lead the transition is Fargo manufacturer Branick Industries Inc., which produces a nitrogen tire inflation system that is being installed in tire shops worldwide.

Branick recently received an order from Costco Tire Centers, the largest wholesale club in the United States, for 400 of the systems to be placed throughout the United States and Canada, Branick CEO Duane Brasch said.

"This is huge," said Peggy Fisher, a commercial fleet tire consultant from Rochester Hills, Mich. Fisher is recognized by the Tire Industry Association as North America's leading independent truck tire and wheel expert.

"It's the biggest thing that has happened with nitrogen, outside of racing," she said. "Costco is the biggest entity to take on nitrogen."

Nitrogen's use is just being introduced to the commercial (truck) and retail (car) markets, she said.

"Branick has been leading the push," Fisher said. "They've been working hard on this."

The push began in May 2002 when Brasch received a phone call from Rob Soury, a South African with 30-plus years in the tire business.

Tire companies there were already promoting nitrogen as a means of extending tire life, Brasch said.

Soury told Brasch the time was right for the United States to start using nitrogen in tires.

Brasch flew to Florida the following month to meet Soury and became excited about the potential, he said.

"From that point on we were full-speed ahead in developing and testing the product," Brasch said.

That fall, Branick Industries was the only vendor to show a nitrogen tire inflation system at the Specialty Equipment Market Association's trade show in Las Vegas.

In 2003, eight or nine vendors from all corners of the world displayed nitrogen units at the show, said Gil Schoener, Branick president. The vendors included big names like Ingersoll Rand and Parker Hannifin.

“We got a lot of interest the first year. As time went on, it exploded,” Schoener said.

Branick placed its first ad in Tire Business, a trade magazine read by tire dealers worldwide.

“That’s when Costco called us,” Brasch said.

Costco Wholesale Corp., with headquarters in Issaquah, Wash., operates about 430 membership warehouse stores serving 41 million cardholders in 36 states, Puerto Rico, Canada, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, Taiwan and the United Kingdom.

It is larger than Wal-Mart’s Sam’s Club, according to Hoover’s, an online database that provides information on 12 million companies.

There are many reasons for nitrogen’s increased popularity.

Traditional compressed air molecules, smaller than nitrogen, pass through tire liners and cause tires to lose air, Fisher said.

Nitrogen particles are larger and pass through tire liners 30 percent to 40 percent slower than oxygen, she said. So tire pressure stays constant for a longer period.

Tread mileage and fuel economy will improve with more constant inflation pressures, and overall tire life should be noticeably extended, Fisher wrote in a July 2000 article on nitrogen.

Oxygen contains moisture that causes steel tire plies to rust and weaken the tire, Fisher said.

“That would theoretically extend the life because tires are not rusting with nitrogen,” she said.

Water vapor also causes steel tire rims to rust and aluminum rims to corrode, Fisher said.

And tires run cooler with nitrogen than oxygen, Fisher said, resulting in better tread wear.

For years, NASCAR race car drivers have inflated their tires with nitrogen, as have some commercial airlines, Fisher said.

NASA uses nitrogen to inflate tires on its space shuttles.

And with the awareness raised in recent years by concerns about the under-inflation of tires, nitrogen is being considered in other markets.

Fargo Tire Service Inc. started marketing nitrogen for tires about two years ago, company Vice President Paul Anderson said.

The option is offered customers who are buying tires or having their tires repaired.

And it seems to be catching on, Anderson said, noting that “a lot more than we originally thought” are switching to nitrogen.

“It’s not as many as we’d like. We’d like to have everybody doing it,” Anderson said.

You can tell who has made the switch just by looking at their tires. Green valve stem caps are installed when tires are filled with nitrogen, Anderson said.

Green hoses designate nitrogen in Fargo Tire’s tire installation shop, where a bright green, Branick-built nitrogen system is used.

Some local truckers are making the switch, Anderson said.

Branick Industries was founded in 1921 as a rubber vulcanizing company.

By 1925, the company established by North Dakota inventor Earl Branick was manufacturing tire spreaders, inspectors and other equipment used in the tire retread industry.

The company moved in 1996 to its 60,000-square-foot facility at 4245 Main Ave. in Fargo.

“There are Branick products throughout the world,” Brasch said. “If you’re in tires, you’ve heard of Branick.”

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