

Windsor gets plant that will install natural gas fuel system in Ford pickup truck



A row of Ford F-150 trucks. (Getty Images files)



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Windsor will be the site of a new plant that will install natural gas fuel systems in Ford F-150 super duty trucks for Canadian customers.

Westport Innovations Inc., a Vancouver-based company that designs natural gas engines and vehicles, will officially open Wednesday the 20,000-square-foot Westport Windsor Integration Centre in the west end.

The company's bi-fuel compressed natural gas and gasoline Westport WiNG Power System is an option for the Ford F-250 through F-550 Super Duty trucks equipped with either the 6.2-litre V8 or 6.8-litre V10 gasoline engines, said John Howell, spokesman for Westport.

The plant is currently running on a skeleton crew, but the workforce could grow depending on Canadian consumers' demand for the natural-gas powered super duty trucks, said Howell. He said he expects most orders will come from fleet sales.

“It could provide some jobs in Windsor, and we could go to a second shift if we have enough demand,” he said. “We will hire people as needed.”

David Shuttleworth, spokesman for Ford of Canada, welcomed Westport’s Windsor investment. “We congratulate Westport on the opening of their new Integration centre in Windsor,” Shuttleworth said in an email. “Westport has been a key collaborator on Ford F-Series bi-fuel conversion. We look forward to strengthening our partnership and offering to our F-Series and fleet customers an increasing selection of natural gas vehicles to choose from that will both reduce their operating costs and lower fleet emissions.”

Westport operates a similar “integration centre” near Ford’s Louisville, Ky., plant that builds the F-150 series truck. That centre, which opened its doors about 16 months ago, installs the option in 100 to 200 trucks a month for U.S. customers, said Howell.

The Westport-powered Ford Super Duty trucks are designed to have a range of between 320 and 525 kilometres on CNG alone depending on tank size, plus an additional 700 kilometres on gasoline, with payback expected in two to three years, depending on distance driven, according to the company. The option adds about \$11,500 to the price of the vehicle, said Howell.

“The natural gas fuel system is added to the vehicle,” he said. “We don’t remove anything. The gasoline fuel system will kick in seamlessly once the natural gas system is depleted.”

The centre will work on vehicles that are transported from Ford’s Oakville assembly plant. Once installation is completed, the truck is transported back to Oakville and then shipped to the appropriate Ford dealership, said Howell.

Windsor was Ford’s preferred location for the integration centre because it runs engine facilities in the city and has an established transportation route linking its Oakville and Windsor operations, said Howell. He also noted that Windsor is a 40-minute drive to Westport’s automotive engineering hub in Plymouth, Mich.

The centre gives Windsor an opportunity to capitalize on the expected growth in demand for natural gas, considered a cheaper and environmentally friendly alternative to the gasoline engine, said Matt Marchand, chief executive officer of the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce.

“It’s exciting that they’ve chosen to locate in Windsor-Essex,” said Marchand. “Our skilled workforce and robust auto sector was all part of the location decision. It positions the region to get in on the ground floor of an area that has vast potential to grow in the future.”