

Patchwork – Oilfields Offer Reprieve From The Open Road

Like many linehaul truckers, there came a time in Len Fletcher's career when he simply wanted a break from life on the road. Two-and-a-half years of living in his truck had taken its toll — both on his body and his personal life.

But trucking was in his blood and Fletcher wasn't ready to turn his back on the profession to which he had dedicated most of his life. So, he ventured to Northern Alberta and took up another form of trucking — hauling in the rugged oilfields of Alberta.

Fletcher found work with Trottier Trucking, a company that operates nearly 50 trucks out of four Northern Alberta locations. And he couldn't be happier.

"In the patch you can live a normal life, you're home every night," said Fletcher, as he took Truck News on a run to pick up some produced water which we then delivered to one of Chevron's water injection wells.

Produced water is oilfield lingo for salt water that is extracted from the ground along with oil or gas at sweet wells. This water needs to be transported back to the injection well where it is recycled back into the ground.

It was a beautiful morning in late May when we joined Fletcher on our run in Trottier's Kenworth W800, nicknamed 'Grumpy.' It was one of those days that truckers in the oilpatch live for — clear skies, dry roads and a light breeze to keep the mosquitoes away.

"When it's nice out and the roads are clear, there's no better place to be," said Fletcher as he maneuvered the Kenworth tanker truck and pup over a twisting gravel road. "But," he added, "it's not always a walk in the park. These roads get pretty slick at times."

That's what makes trucking in the oilfields so appealing to Fletcher and other drivers who venture off the beaten path. They enjoy the challenge posed by the rugged terrain, which demands they use all their driving skills. While the speedometer rarely reaches highway speeds, the driver must never let his guard down or he can easily find himself on his lid or stuck in axle-deep mud. That's why chaining up is routine, especially in the spring and winter.

"If ever in doubt, throw a set on," advised Fletcher. "For one, if you do get into trouble and you don't have chains on, the oil companies aren't footing the bill. And it's far more embarrassing to call for help than to put the chains on."

Traffic on the gravel roads is usually light, but the road itself is a formidable challenge for drivers, even at low speeds.

"I don't have to worry about a woman and kids stepping out in front of me out here," said Fletcher. It's Mother Nature that poses the biggest threat. "I've been chained right up, but still tobogganing," he said.

Fletcher is always cognizant about the dangers that face truckers working the oilfields, but he said following proper safety procedures minimizes the chance of an incident.

"There's no room for mistakes out here," he said.

Part of Fletcher's job involves hauling sour water — a deadly substance that can kill you without warning if you're not careful. Sour water has H₂S gas dissolved in it, and like produced water it comes from the ground along with the oil and gas that's extracted. But whereas produced water comes from sweet wells, sour water is extracted from sour wells and must also be transported to an injection site.

Many truckers in the oilfields refuse to work with sour water, but for Fletcher it's just part of the job.

"I work with sour and I've never had a problem because I respect it," he said. "I want to go home at the end of the day, so I'm never careless."

He never leaves home without a portable monitor that measures the amount of gas in the air and sounds an alarm if it reaches potentially dangerous levels.

"It's an expensive piece of equipment, but it'll save your life," Fletcher said.

In recent years, safety and environmental concerns have topped the priorities among companies providing oilfield services. Now, when someone gets hurt or killed, it's usually



because those stringent safety procedures weren't followed, said Fletcher.

"If you follow your safety procedures, you'll never be in trouble," he vowed.

Although Fletcher loves his job, he admits it's not for everyone. There's the isolation factor to cope with — not everybody enjoys living in a small communities like Fox Creek, hours from the nearest major city. But it does have its advantages, said Fletcher.

"We make the best of it," he said. "If a guy likes hunting and fishing, this is the place to be."

The community's isolation makes it difficult for the fleet to attract qualified drivers — even

though the company's drivers make between \$60,000 and \$100,000 per year. (Even Fletcher himself eventually took a job with another Trottier Trucking contractor working out of Hinton, Alta. where the isolation factor wasn't so severe.) But for the adventurer, the opportunity to rack up a six-figure income by driving a truck is too good to pass up.

Drivers are paid by the hour and while they do have to abide by hours-of-service regulations, there's plenty of opportunity to rack up the hours within the legal limits. There's currently no weekly driving cap in Alberta, although that's slated to change under the recently-approved federal hours-of-service regulations. Trottier Trucking could easily add more trucks to its fleet if it had the drivers in place. But while the company is willing to take on drivers that don't have oilfield experience, it's not a job for amateurs.

"This is the toughest trucking in Alberta, right here," Fletcher said, adding there's also the peace of mind of knowing skilled off-highway truckers are in short supply.

"As long as the patch is busy, we're busy," he added. "You'll always be able to feed yourself and your family working in the patch."

Truckers who ply the oilfields must be able to work without supervision, said Fletcher. Most of the oil wells are unmanned, so there's nobody there to reprimand you if you get lazy and start cutting corners. For Fletcher, it's one of the more endearing qualities of the job.



"It's kind of like being your own boss," he said. "You know what you have to do and you do it."

Another aspect of the job that Fletcher welcomes is the ability to spend much of the day outside the truck. While making transfers, oilfield haulers must frequently get out to load and unload, which takes about 40 minutes to an hour each time. It's not uncommon to spend just half a day behind the wheel. It may be more labour-intensive than highway trucking, but Fletcher said he finds it's easier on his body than sitting behind the wheel for hours at a time.

"I got crippled up from sitting all the time," he said. Trottier is just one of many fleets specializing in servicing Alberta's oilfields.

The company is always on the lookout for new drivers. For information, contact Chris Kostiuk at 780 622-8223.

By James Menzies

Safety Comes First When Working With Sour Gas

Ask most oilfield truck drivers what their greatest fear is, and you'll usually get the same answer: "Sour gas."

Sour gas is a natural gas that contains Hydrogen Sulphide (H_2S). Just one whiff of the deadly gas can render a driver unconscious. Numerous truck drivers have died as a result of inhaling sour gas in the field or when working with tanker trailers that have been used to haul sour water.

While some oilfield truckers refuse to work with sour gas altogether, it's just part of the job for others.

But you don't have to be afraid of sour gas if you give it the respect it deserves and take steps to minimize the risk of exposure, says Murray Sunstrum, vice-president of safety with Enform — an Alberta company that provides the H_2S Alive program for oilfield workers.

"This is one of the more interesting hazards in our industry," Sunstrum says. "We have this truly critical hazard out there, but we can manage it as long we don't lose sight of its danger."

Unfortunately, the majority of truckers who fall victim to sour gas do just that and lose sight of the fact it can be lethal. "In field inspections, people are seeing a lot of complacency," warns Sunstrum.

A recent safety alert issued by the Canadian Petroleum Safety Council (CPSC) asks " H_2S - Are we forgetting how deadly it can be?"

"In recent years, the upstream oil and gas industry in Canada may be moving towards an attitude of complacency with sour gas," the bulletin reports, noting the problem has been particularly alarming among tank truck operators. "In some circumstances there may even be a macho attitude that exposure to H_2S is 'part of the job' and there is no real harm in being exposed or even knocked down. The reality is — exposure to H_2S can be detrimental to your health, if not your life!"

While many truckers use handheld monitoring devices to warn them of the impending dangers, Sunstrum stresses that shouldn't be a trucker's first line of defence. "Personal equipment is really the final level of protection," says Sunstrum.

While the industry standard training program for oilfield truckers who work with sour gas is H_2S Alive, the training shouldn't end there, the CPSC insists.

"Each H_2S course is taught with the clear understanding that it is an introductory level of education only," says the CPSC. "Do not confuse this elementary education with adequate training. Workers require ongoing guidance and training to understand how to avoid releases and what parts of their work can potentially expose them to H_2S ."

In the event of a sour gas leak or spill, the following actions should be taken according to the H_2S Alive training curriculum:

- 1 Evacuate: Leave the area immediately and get to a safe area that's upwind from the leak or spill.**
- 2 Alarm: Call for help using whatever means are available — whether it be yelling or using the CB radio of a truck that's not in the contaminated area.**
- 3 Assess: Assess the situation and come up with a safe course of action.**
- 4 Protect: If a rescue effort is required, protect yourself before taking any action. Use the buddy system if possible.**
- 5 Rescue: Remove a victim to safety.**
- 6 Revive: Apply rescue breathing if necessary.**
- 7 Medical Aid: Arrange the transport of the victim to a place where he can receive medical attention.**

For more information about H_2S Alive, contact Enform at 403-250-9606 or Global Training at 403 934-5046.