

Energy Innovation and Education

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Exploring the Industry

Ever wonder what it would be like to strike oil? You can get your hands dirty in doing so and learn about the energy industry at CountryMark Pavilion.

“Our goal is to offer visitors a 360-degree view of CountryMark and the petroleum industry,” comments marketing coordinator Raylee Honeycutt, who led an employee committee that set the vision for the Pavilion.

The 7,000-square-foot building, which houses a museum-quality exhibit and meeting facilities, brings the oil industry to life. CountryMark – an oil exploration, production, refining and marketing company – opened the Pavilion at its refinery, located in Mt. Vernon, in August 2014.

“The feedback has been great!” Honeycutt declares. “It’s exceeding expectations. The way we’ve been able to incorporate the interactive components ... adds a variety of hands-on opportunities for guests.”

Among the features:

- Geology pod explores the Illinois Basin, crude oil and more.
- Refinery pod. “That really gives visitors an understanding of how, once crude oil leaves the ground and enters the refinery, those molecules change and become the valuable product of diesel fuel or gasoline or all of the other products that come out of the refinery,” Honeycutt explains.
- Short video illustrates a day in the life of a farmer as well as CountryMark employees.
- Interactive wall traces oil’s journey from the ground through its delivery to customers as refined fuels. It also highlights CountryMark’s role as a farmer-owned cooperative.

At press time, the Pavilion had hosted approximately 500 employees, member cooperatives, current and prospective customers, and business partners – with another 500 visitors expected during the summer months. It will begin providing educational tours for children this fall.

“Our target is the third- to fifth-grade level initially,” Honeycutt comments. “We’d like to grow the program to begin talking with high school-age (students) about STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers and what opportunities within the energy industry there are for students ...

“A lot of times, especially down in Southern Indiana, kids drive by a pump jack out in the oil field and may not know what that really means or what’s going to happen with that oil once it comes out, so it (the Pavilion) gives us a great story to tell.”



Visitors take a stroll along the interactive wall at CountryMark Pavillion.

Upping the (Energy) Ante

You could call it a powerhouse.

The Energy Innovation Center (EIC), spanning 65,000 square feet in Milwaukee’s Century City Tower, will serve as a valuable resource to advance the energy, power and control industry. It was launched last August by the Mid-West Energy Research Consortium (M-WERC).

Collaboration between the business and education worlds is fueling the project. The EIC will house industry and academic scientists, engineers, business and economic development leaders and others. Among activities are testing and licensing new technologies, nurturing start-up companies and advanced research.

The EIC will feature discovery labs; M-WERC’s EPiC business incubator, which emphasizes clean energy technology; and a workforce development center focusing on internships and recruiting at universities and technical colleges. Early tenants include Alliance Federated Energy (specializing in plasma gasification technology to generate electric and thermal energy and biofuel) and the Manufacturing Diversity Institute.

Established in 2009, M-WERC has 80-plus member companies and academic institutions in eight states: Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan and Missouri.

“We are always interested in and supportive of any efforts to strengthen innovation and the commercialization of new, affordable and reliable energy technologies,” asserts Tristan Vance, director of the Indiana Office of Energy Development.

A grand opening will be held in September, with the EIC expected to be completely up and running in October 2016.

RESOURCE: Energy Innovation Center at www.m-werc.org/EIC

RESOURCES: Raylee Honeycutt, CountryMark, at www.countrymark.com | CountryMark Pavilion at www.facebook.com/CountryMarkPavillion

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Out With Mid-Grade, In With E15?

Will gas stations eventually replace the “middle man” – aka mid-grade pumps – with E15 dispensers? If ethanol makers have their way, the answer is yes, analysts from *Kiplinger* say.

E15, which contains 15% ethanol and 85% gasoline, is an environmentally-friendly alternative and typically five to 10 cents cheaper per gallon than E10 (as regular unleaded fuel, it contains 10% ethanol and 90% gasoline).

But slow down! Potential roadblocks are leading some retailers to put on the brakes.

“We’ll sell whatever the customer desires, but the challenge for us on E15 is the underground tanks,” contends Scot Imus, executive director of the Indiana Petroleum Marketers & Convenience Store Association.

Typically, retailers offer three brands of gasoline – premium, mid-grade and regular unleaded. To provide mid-grade, they combine fuel from two underground tanks: one holding premium and the other E10.

“Retailers are going to continue to sell mid-grade. ... Going back to the *Kiplinger* report, I’m not going to lose my premium (in order to begin selling E15). I’m not going to lose my E10, so I’m going to need to put in a new tank,” Imus remarks.

Installing one could cost anywhere from \$100,000 to \$250,000,



he estimates. Imus points out that most businesses providing E15 are able to do so, in part, because they’ve already made an investment in an E85 tank (they pull fuel from that tank and one holding E10 to offer E15).

A big challenge in providing E15: The majority of underground storage tanks aren’t compatible with E15 – neither are vehicles manufactured before 2001.

“Let’s say I have a customer who has a 1999 car and he just sees the cheap price of E15,” Imus suggests, “and he’s not paying any attention to the warning signs – and I hate to say it, but a lot of people scratch their head and don’t really know what year their car is – and something happens and they come back on the retailer. There’s no liability protection, saying, ‘Wait a minute. Didn’t you pay attention to my signs?’”

He stresses, “It’s not that we don’t like (E15).

It’s not that we don’t want to offer the product, but there are obstacles that are difficult to overcome. And when (the price of) gasoline is around where it is now, there’s not great consumer demand for it.”

As of mid-May, E15 was available at one Indiana location (in Rensselaer), according to the Indiana Soybean Alliance, and 100-plus sites nationwide.

RESOURCE: Scot Imus, Indiana Petroleum Marketers & Convenience Store Association, at www.ipca.org