

First Big Piece Of 'Electric Highway' Gets Juice

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Jeff Barnard, Associated Press

CENTRAL POINT, Ore. (AP) — Electric car owners riding along Oregon's Interstate 5 don't have to worry about running out of juice on the open road.

The first major stretch of what's been dubbed an "Electric Highway" on the West Coast from Canada to Mexico went operational Friday with the opening of a series of fast-charging stations along 160 miles of the interstate.

The eight stations stretch from the California border north to the Oregon city of Cottage Grove and are located at gas stations, restaurants and motels just off I-5, the nation's second-busiest interstate. One station is at an inn that was once a stage coach stop.

They are spaced about every 25 miles, so a Nissan Leaf with a range of about 70 miles can miss one station and still make it to the next. Electric car drivers will be able to recharge in about 20 minutes. The charge is free for now.

"I would say range-anxiety with these fast chargers will be nearly a non-issue for me," said Justin Denley, who owns a Nissan Leaf. Inspired by the stations, his family is planning a trip from Medford to Portland, a distance of about 280 miles.

Last summer, he took the family on a 120-mile trip to the coast and had to include an overnight stop at an RV park to charge up.

Ashley Horvat, who oversees the highway electrification project for the state, drove an electric car from her office in Salem 225 miles to Central Point for ceremonies and a caravan of electric cars kicking off the installation.

"We are hoping we are setting the stage for what will become the first highway, but not necessarily the only highway that is electrified," she said.

The state is working with AeroVironment, Inc., the Monrovia, Calif., company that makes the charging stations, on the project.

As for Denley, he expects the trip to Portland to take perhaps three hours longer than in a gas car, because the only chargers available for the last 100 miles are slower, level 2 chargers.

Level 1 car chargers use 110 volts, like a regular home outlet, and it can take an entire night to charge a vehicle. Level 2 uses 240 volts, like a home dryer or range, and can charge a car in three or four hours.

But Level 3, which uses 480 volts of direct current, makes en route charging feasible by boosting a Nissan Leaf's 45-kilowatt battery from a 20 percent charge to

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80 percent in less than 30 minutes.

Interstate 5 stretches 1,350 miles from British Columbia to Baja, Calif.

By the end of this year, DC fast-chargers will be installed along the I-5 from Canada to the California border, a distance of about 550 miles. Another 22 are being installed in locations as far away as 120 miles from Portland, Oregon's largest city.

The eight new charging stations each have a level 3 charger, and a level 2 charger for backup. Drivers equipped with an electronic key fob can drive up and plug in around the clock. They get the fob when they sign up for the charging program.

The I-5 stretch is not the first electric highway corridor in the country.

That honor goes to Tennessee, where Cracker Barrel Old Country Store restaurants installed a network of charging stations last year, including a dozen fast-chargers, along the interstates connecting Nashville, Knoxville and Chattanooga, a total of 425 miles.

Steve Smith, executive director of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, drove the 180 miles from Knoxville to Nashville last December in his Leaf.

"I'll be very pleased to be driving around in the electric vehicle when we have \$5 or \$6 dollar gas," he said. "That extra 20 minutes (to charge up) is going to matter a lot less."

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