

The Gee's Bend Ferry in Wilcox County will soon become the first all-electric passenger ferry in the United States, and the second in the world.



ALDOT's Gee's Bend Ferry Going Green

The historic Gee's Bend Ferry is getting a 21st century makeover. ALDOT has been awarded a \$1.09 million grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to convert the diesel-powered work boat into a battery-powered electric vessel. It is set to become the first all-electric ferry in the United States, and only the second in the world.

The grant awarded to ALDOT is part of the National Clean Diesel Funding Assistance Program, which is the funding mechanism for the Diesel Emission Reduction Act (DERA). The objective of this program is to help fund projects that would achieve significant reductions in diesel emissions in terms of tons of pollution produced and exposure.

HMS Ferries operates the 24-vehicle/149-passenger ferry built in 2004 by Bonner Yacht Works for ALDOT. It makes five round-trips daily, 362 days a year across the Alabama River between Gee's Bend and Camden. It is estimated that the vessel's four diesel engines run up to 2,700 hours annually. The conversion from diesel to electric will not only eliminate the ferry's fuel emissions, reducing air pollution, it will also reduce ALDOT's operating expenses by an estimated 50 percent.

The switch to electric power is the latest development in the colorful and sometimes controversial history of the Gee's Bend Ferry over the decades.

According to the online Encyclopedia of Alabama, the original ferry ran on cables, providing a vital connection during the early and mid-20th century between Camden, the county seat, and the small community of Gee's Bend, whose residents were mostly descendants of slaves.

But in 1962, during the Civil Rights Movement, the ferry was closed by local officials in an effort to prevent residents of Gee's Bend from reaching Camden to register to vote. Without the ferry, Gee's Bend residents traveled 80 miles round-trip to get to the county seat, compared to a 15-minute boat ride.

More than 40 years passed before the ferry service was reinstated, in 2006.

During the ferry's absence, Gee's Bend became renowned for the colorful quilts produced by women in the community. Since its return, the ferry itself has become a tourist attraction, drawing

travelers and tourists from across the globe.

The Marissa Mae Nicole, one of two vessels in ALDOT's Mobile Bay Ferry service, is covering the Gee's Bend route while that ferry is being retrofitted with its new electric power system. The conversion is currently ongoing, with the newly outfitted, all-electric ferry expected to be back in service at Gee's Bend in late 2018.

Transportation Director John Cooper said it is a feather in the state's cap to be the first in the nation with this type of conversion.

"It is exciting that the state of Alabama will lead the nation with the use of this clean technology," Cooper said. "This is an opportunity for ALDOT to showcase innovations, while maintaining this important passenger-ferry service for the people of Wilcox County."