

Self-driving trucks are cruising down I-45 between Dallas and Houston

August 8 2019, by Orla Mccaffrey, The Dallas Morning News



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When Don Burnette worked at Otto, a self-driving truck startup, his team hit some pretty big milestones. It recorded the first shipment of cargo delivered by a self-driving truck: 50,000 cans of Budweiser in

2016. It was acquired by Uber the same year.

But something didn't feel right to Burnette, an engineer by trade who's spent almost a decade in the [self-driving vehicle industry](#).

"That was very much a demo-like system," Burnette said in an interview with The Dallas Morning News. "It wasn't built with production or scale in mind. And it wasn't quite the technology that was going to push the industry forward."

When Uber shifted away from self-driving trucks last year, Burnette saw an opportunity. He helped create Kodiak Robotics in 2018, with the hope that driverless trucks could serve commercial clients.

Kodiak Robotics is putting down roots in Texas, and has become one of the first self-driving trucking companies operating in the state. The Dallas-to-Houston (and back) route features a safety driver behind the wheel.

And humans take over for more challenging stretches between freeways and final destinations. Once Kodiak masters the "middle mile"—freeway driving that's a large part of most routes—it'll tackle the non-highway driving that's proven difficult to other driverless startups.

"As hard as it is to navigate city streets, autonomous vehicles are much closer to being able to drive on more structured interstate highways, which have no jaywalking pedestrians, no aggressive cyclists, and no runaway pets," Kodiak said in a blog post announcing the news.

Dallas' key role in the state's freight economy made it a prime location, said co-founder Paz Eshel. The 276-mile stretch of Interstate 45 that connects Dallas to Houston and Galveston is the most heavily traveled freight corridor in the state, accounting for nearly half of all statewide

truck shipping, according to the Texas Department of Transportation.

More than 85,000 vehicles travel I-45 each day in Dallas County. Closer to Houston, the count jumps to 245,000.

"It's a strategic location with high demand for trucks," Eshel said. "As we thought about where it made sense to launch our technology, Dallas emerged as one of the leading spots."

Kodiak has partnered with a handful of companies to ship freight between the two cities, and is planning future routes in the state. It won't reveal specific companies, but said the total number is under five.

"For automated vehicle technology to take off, it has to be profitable," said Chris Poe, a senior research engineer at Texas A&M's Transportation Institute.

Kodiak's workforce has climbed to nearly 60 people after it raised \$40 million in venture capital funding last year. Its expansion in North Texas includes a new eight-person office south of Dallas in Lancaster.

"Ultimately, we want to be operating driverless trucks on highways within the state of Texas," Burnette said. "We want a completely driverless system with no driver in the cab."

Self-driving truck companies are a new trend in Texas. The USPS started using TuSimple, a startup valued at \$1 billion, to deliver mail between Phoenix and Dallas in May. And San Francisco-based Embark started shipping refrigerators from El Paso to Palm Springs, Calif., in October 2018.

Self-driving passenger-vehicle startups have also sprouted up in the area. Drive.ai, a startup out of Mountain View, Calif., performed test runs in

Frisco and Arlington before it was acquired by Apple in June.

The state's welcoming regulatory environment is drawing companies.

In 2017, Gov. Greg Abbott signed into a law a bill that regulated [autonomous vehicles](#) for the first time in Texas. The law requires self-driving cars to follow traffic laws and adhere to registration and title laws but otherwise doesn't discriminate against driverless cars. TxDOT is putting together a task force that will be a one-stop resource for automated vehicle advancement in the state.

FedEx Office will begin testing an automated delivery system of their own in North Texas: robots that can deliver groceries or a fresh pizza to a customer's home. The [pilot program](#) in Plano and Frisco is expected to kick off this summer, and the first deliveries should follow in 2020.

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Citation: Self-driving trucks are cruising down I-45 between Dallas and Houston (2019, August 8) retrieved 3 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2019-08-self-driving-trucks-cruising-i-dallas.html>

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