

Moving big blades through city traffic a daunting task

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IT'S impossible to miss them — those gargantuan wind-turbine blades being trucked along Houston freeways. Moving the sculpted, aerodynamic props, which look like appendages to a spacecraft, is such a daunting task that the operation is the subject of a SPEED Channel Dangerous Drives cable TV episode.

Maneuvering the blades through Houston was the first huge challenge for the featured truckers, who tote the massive payloads from Port Freeport in Freeport, roughly 1,250 miles to the Titan Wind Project in Miller, S.D.

This 5,050 megawatt wind energy development, a joint venture between [British Petroleum Alternative Energy](#) and turbine-manufacturer [Clipper Windpower](#), is one of the largest wind installations in the world.

The Clipper wind-turbine sections routed through Houston are for the Liberty 2.5-MW series, consisting of three blades mounted on a tubular-steel tower. Blade lengths range from about 142 to 158 feet, with rotor diameters up to 325 feet, depending on the class.

Big-rig driver [Steve Van Zile](#), who leads the train of three trucks — each with a blade — being filmed for the Dangerous Drives episode, said the blade he totes is roughly 145 feet long and weighs about 35,000 pounds.

“We’re 178 feet long, the truck and the blade,” Van Zile said, “and it’s a legal 80,000 pounds.”

The muscle to tug this payload is provided by a Cummins turbodiesel generating 600 horsepower and, more importantly, 1,850 lb.-ft. of torque.

An 18-speed transmission helps get his heavily burdened Kenworth up to highway speed.

Sharp turns are high on the list challenges while driving through the city, Van Zile said, but dealing with motorists’ reaction to the operation requires even more attention.

“The city traffic is the hardest part because people don’t think,” he said. “It’s pretty novel to them.”

A huge role in coordinating the long rigs’ movement through turns and traffic is by the pilot vehicles. These pickups or SUVs riding front and rear of each rig wear OVERSIZE LOAD signs and flash warning lights.

“They let traffic know we’re around, they control and protect the blade, and they also steer the trailer if they need to,” Van Zile said.

Driving the Dodge Ram pilot vehicle ahead of his truck is his wife, Faith. While Fords (an F-150 tailed the caravan), and Chevys and GMCs are common pilot vehicles, the majority are Dodges — Rams and Dakotas.

Paving the way for the caravan is a two-motorcycle police escort, which, along with helping manage the traffic around the rigs, can reroute the trucks if necessary.

I briefly talked with one of the officers during the stop where the escort began. He confirmed the lunch-hour traffic would be a bit of a problem, but was confident the trucks could be efficiently moved through the city.

He also was efficient in cutting my interviews short so the caravan could get moving — on a route the officers had altered to help ease problems with traffic. My compact car, parked in front of the trucks, didn’t faze the caravan’s launch. Before I had a chance to move it forward, and out of the way, it was “wagons ho!” and the rigs proceeded close alongside of me. Looking up at the blades as they cast shadows over the car was an eerily cool experience, punctuating the enormity of the unusual cargo.

After clearing the city and heading north on Interstate 45, I talked with Dangerous Drives field producer [Andy Seestedt](#). In order to give viewers an up-close-and-personal look at the extraordinary driving situation, he rides shotgun with the driver — capturing the operation with a hand-held camera.

Without the assistance of the police escort, Seestedt said maneuvering through the city would have been an extreme hassle. He said this Dangerous Drives episode will be aired near Thanksgiving.

Next, the Dangerous Drives crew saddles up with border patrol agents in Arizona, and is readying for a shoot with a military fuel convoy in Iraq.

See the SPEED Channel Web site at <http://www.speedtv.com/schedule/> for programming time updates.

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Reference:

Spell, T. (2009, August 9). Moving Big Blades Through City Traffic A Daunting Task. *Chron.com*.