

Automakers Prepare for Diesel Comeback

Oil shortages and high gasoline prices in the 1970s piqued consumer interest in diesel passenger vehicles. Sales flourished, but quickly fell as motorists found them to be unreliable, underpowered, loud and dirty. Most manufacturers stopped marketing diesel passenger vehicles in the United States by the 1990s, but they flourished in Europe and currently account for 40 percent of European auto sales. Now, as gasoline prices continually increase, automakers are preparing for a diesel comeback in the United States.

Diesel technology has come a long way since the 1970s. Not only are diesel vehicles significantly cleaner, they offer 30 to 40 percent improved fuel efficiency over gasoline-powered vehicles. Automakers hope this significant selling point will help them capitalize on the new-found American interest in fuel efficient hybrid vehicles.

"Hybrids have proven that there is a market for high-mileage cars," says Karl Brauer, editor in chief of automotive website Edmunds.com. Because diesel vehicles are less expensive to manufacture, they are more affordable than their hybrid counterparts. According to J.D. Power and Associates, the consumer premium is \$4,000 for a hybrid vehicle and \$2,500 for a diesel vehicle.

Mercedes-Benz recently began marketing its first diesel car for the American market since 1999, the E320 CDI sedan. It utilizes a smart fuel-injection system that, according to product PR specialist Michelle Murad, cuts emissions by releasing the exact amount of fuel required to power the engine's cylinders. Older diesel engines were not as accurate, burning the extra fuel and producing excess emissions.

"The E320 CDI is 25 to 30 percent cleaner on average in carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide emissions (compared to a Mercedes-Benz gasoline-powered sedan)," says Murad. It also provides increased torque. "It really gives you that 'back of the seat' feeling when you're leaving the traffic light."

Despite emitting lower levels of carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide emissions,

diesel vehicles release higher levels of nitrogen oxides (NOx) than gasoline cars, which could present roadblocks in California, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Vermont, five states which have enacted emission standards stricter than the federal government's. It is uncertain whether diesels will be immediately available in those states, but auto manufacturers are confident all 50 states will be offering diesels by 2006, the year federally mandated clean diesel fuel hits the market.

At the 2004 New York International Automobile Show, Chrysler announced a fall introduction for its Jeep Liberty diesel, the first midsize sport-utility diesel vehicle in the United States. Compared to the gasoline-powered Liberty, the common-rail diesel engine reduces CO₂ emissions by 20 percent and improves fuel efficiency by 25 percent.

Volkswagen also announced the availability of a new diesel vehicle at the auto show, the Passat TDI, which features a fuel injector for each of its four cylinders and is rated at 38 mpg highway and 27 mpg city. Volkswagen already offers diesel engines with its Touareg, Golf, Jetta and New Beetle models.

According to Dan Benjamin, analyst for Allied Business Intelligence (ABI), modern fuel injected diesel engines don't have the problems associated with diesel engines in the past. He believes automakers must work to overcome long-held stereotypes that diesel cars are noisy and dirty. ABI projects annual diesel vehicle sales will grow at a healthy pace.

AMSOIL offers a premium line of synthetic diesel oils that provide unmatched fuel economy benefits and the ultimate in wear protection for extended drain intervals. Independent laboratory testing reveals that AMSOIL Series 3000 Synthetic Heavy-Duty Diesel Oil, combined with AMSOIL lubricants in the drivetrain, provides up to 8.2 percent improved fuel efficiency.

