

OP-ED

Is There a Diesel in Your Future?

By Harold Miller

Way back in February of 1978, a fellow manufacturer's representative was driving his brand new Oldsmobile diesel from Albany to a sales meeting in Toledo, Ohio. He stopped over in Syracuse for the night, staying at a motel just off the Thruway. Next morning when he tried to start his car (in minus 10 degree weather), it was a no-go. My friend hopped on a plane to the meeting and on the way back, stopped to pick up his car. The temperature had climbed above freezing and his car, hesitatingly, coughed and sputtered to life. He nursed it back to Albany and promptly sold it. General Motors had hastily converted gasoline engines to diesel service. The engine blocks could not take the stress created by the higher compression ratios and many failed. I had taken rides in my friend's car and it was a rough piece — thrown together by GM to combat the gasoline shortages during our first energy crisis. What it did accomplish was to kill diesel passenger-car sales in this country to this day.

Fast forward 30 years — it's a brand new ballgame for diesel-engine passenger cars. Mercedes is introducing its remarkable E320 BlueTec Diesel. Unless you're standing outside the car during startup with your ear cocked to the engine compartment, you can hardly tell it's a diesel. There is no soot, no smell, no clatter, and no CO2 emissions. This marvel of

modern-day engineering has virtually the same performance as the gasoline model, gets 30 percent better mileage, and costs but \$1,000 more. It is the vanguard of many more to come including offerings by BMW, Audi, Renault, Mitsubishi, Subaru, and GM to name just a few.

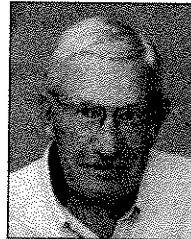
The very first diesel engine invented by Rudolph Diesel ran on vegetable oil, and today's diesels can easily be converted to biodiesel fuel. As a matter of fact, several biodiesel processing facilities (converting soybeans to biofuels) are planned for Central New York. Unlike corn ethanol, biodiesel fuel does not have an energy deficit and does not require a conversion of our present infrastructure of filling stations (except adding a diesel pump). Biofuels stretch our finite supply of fossil fuels and lessen environmental pollution as well as diminishing greenhouse-gas emissions.

Bluetec (the name indicates a bluish chemical called urea which is injected into the exhaust in order to eliminate pollutants) diesels are far and away more practical than hybrids. First of all, they will achieve comparable mileage and cleaner emissions compared to hybrids for a lower premium first cost (\$1,000 for the Mercedes diesel, compared to \$5,000 for the Toyota Camry). Secondly,

hybrids are complex vehicles with lots to go wrong and much higher maintenance costs including, but not limited to, battery replacement. Virtually all the taxis in Europe are diesels because they return at least 250,000 miles of service without engine overhauls.

More than 50 percent of all passenger vehicles sold in Europe are diesels; however, in order for this country to hop on the modern diesel bandwagon, a few things must change. Americans accept diesels for their pickup trucks, but the image of having to pull into truck stops on the highway for fuel turns most people off. In Europe, every filling station has a diesel pump. Americans view diesel automobiles as slow and plodding vehicles on the road, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Diesel racecars have won the famed "24 hours of LeMans" race for the last three years in a row and are favored to win this year's grueling 24-hour race as well.

The ultimate in sophistication is simplicity itself. Diesels require no sparkplugs or electronic ignitions, their mileage is greater than gasoline engines and equal to complex hybrids, maintenance costs are lower and engine life is doubled. Isn't this the essence of energy conservation? □



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