

Taking another look at diesel
Sunday, August 20, 2006
KENN PETERS
AUTO NOTEBOOK

As the price of gas continues its relentless climb, motorists talk about fuel efficiency, smaller cars and hybrids. Few talk about diesel.

For one thing, diesel-powered cars can't be sold new in New York because of emissions standards, although light-duty diesel trucks can be. Hopefully the time will come when diesel-powered cars will once again be in auto showrooms.

What bodes well for the re-introduction of diesel cars is the advent of ultralow-sulfur diesel fuel. It will be introduced across the country by mid-October.

Because it will burn efficiently and cleaner, it might attract new interest in the benefits of diesel engines and might lead to the repeal of anti-diesel laws.

Although diesel is more expensive than gasoline, the positives seem to outweigh the negatives. Unlike hybrid cars that need expensive replacement batteries, diesel engines don't need much. Longevity is the key to diesel.

Diesel engines can go on without a hitch well past the life expectancy of gasoline engines, plus diesel engines typically deliver far greater gas mileage than gas engines.

And here's another thing: The days of noisy, smelly diesel engines are past.

While diesel engines for pickup trucks remain noisy, diesel engines for cars have been engineered to be quiet and powerful. I suspect many people wouldn't know the difference between a diesel- or gas-powered car.

Diesel seems like a good option, considering fuel-cell vehicles are still 10 to 15 years away and hybrids won't be viable for most motorists until battery-packs don't cost in the thousands to replace and the cars go beyond 80,000-or-so miles.

That leaves ethanol, which sounds good but really leaves a lot to be desired.

A gallon of ethanol doesn't contain the same amount of energy as gasoline so mileage is adversely affected. It also can't be sent through the pipeline system because it has corrosive qualities, so it has to be moved by barge and truck, raising the cost of transportation.

So the cost is higher and mileage isn't as good, plus it will be years before there will be reasonable accessibility to ethanol.