

Motor Oil Drain Intervals: An Ethical Burden?

BY DAVID MCFALL

At the top of the pollution hierarchy, most would agree, is nuclear waste. Near the bottom is nuisance or short-lived pollution, such as paper candy wrappers or orange peels. Technology neutralizes much of the rest — but not dumped, untreated used engine oil.

It is inconceivable that the nuclear power industry would conspire to use one more unit of fuel than absolutely necessary. Its waste product, spent uranium fuel rods, represents a gigantic environmental pollutant and threat. Unlike nuclear fuel rods, the waste product of the pas-

senger car engine oil industry — used engine oil — doesn't have to be buried for thousands of years deep inside a Utah mountain. But used engine oil, too, comes at a high environmental price.

"Improperly disposed used oil," according to the Environmental Protection Agency, "is the largest single source of oil pollution fouling our nation's waters." According to the American Petroleum Institute, it amounts to "up to 200 million gallons of used motor oil... dumped every year down sewers, drains or in the ground." API reminds us, too, that, "A single quart of oil can foul thousands of gallons of water."

Unnecessary production of a consumer product results in excess waste. You buy too much of a product (shampoo for example), you can use the excess eventually or pour it down the drain, where the municipal water authority handles it. You buy two heads of lettuce and one goes bad, you scrap it. None of these outcomes has direct or permanent environmental consequences.



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-- Dr. Michael Hoffman

Lasting Effects

Used engine oil, on the other hand, has long-lasting, measurable and significant pollution effects, unique among industrial products. On the pollution continuum, its environmental impact is closer to used nuclear fuel rods than to shampoo.

While the nuclear power industry would not support the production of excess uranium fuel, it is not inconceivable that the U.S. oil industry would support, encourage and skillfully promote excess gasoline engine oil usage, despite the harmful effects of its waste product on the environment.

There is, in fact, considerable evidence to support this conclusion:

- The average European gasoline engine oil drain interval is twice that of the United States (10,000 miles versus 5,000 miles) despite inconsequential differences between Europe and the U.S. in engines, engine oil and driving patterns.
- There have been three U.S. gasoline engine oil quality upgrades over the past decade, and the fourth will be commercialized in mid-2004. Each upgrade has been characterized by oil industry representatives as "technically significant," "robust" or "superior" — and more. With a single exception (Amsoil Inc.; see Automotive Department, March 2003), no oil company is making any attempt

to translate the benefits of these quality upgrades into the one single measure of an engine oil's quality which a consumer can understand: the drain interval, which can directly translate into measurably reduced usage and pollution. They have actively worked against doing so.

- On their labels and advertising, many U.S. oil marketers describe their products as "exceeding" oil industry specifications and vehicle manufacturers' warranties, but they are unanimously silent in providing any guidance on translating this higher quality level into practical help for consumers.

An Ethical Dimension

Ethical considerations are not foreign to business and governmental decisions. They are, for example, central to a proposed and U.S. government-supported, far-reaching international treaty designed to combat tobacco, a proven carcinogen. The treaty is designed to make it more difficult for cigarette companies to promote and sell their products worldwide. That is, to minimize its market.

Moreover, some industries and companies are moving, albeit reluctantly and glacially in some cases, into rethinking their societal obligations. Last year Kraft Foods voluntarily agreed to stop selling and promoting its obesity-inducing products in schools, at the expense of

its sales volume.

Does the exceptional pollution burden of used engine oil impose a higher ethical dimension on engine oil marketers than it does on the managers of other industries where pollution is a manageable or negligible factor?

Do lube industry managers have an ethical duty to develop and reveal information on their product that could reduce the pollution burden — even though it might reduce the size of their market?

In short, is there an extra ethical burden on this industry compared to others?

For answers, I turned to Dr. Michael Hoffman, executive director of Bentley College's Center for Business Ethics in Waltham, Mass. In an early November interview, he remarked, "Any corporation that makes a product which creates exceptional hazardous effects on the environment has an increased ethical obligation to find solutions to decrease those effects. A universal or absolute business ethics principle is to avoid causing unjustifiable harm, and to find strategies to reduce harm, especially that which is self-caused, whenever or wherever possible to do so.

"These comments certainly apply to used engine oil, and challenge the oil industry to demonstrate that it is doing everything possible to meet this ethical standard," he continued.

"Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that this is not happening."

He added pointedly, "Furthermore, corporate ethical sensitivity and social responsibility are at a high-water mark today, perhaps more than ever before in the minds of companies' stakeholders. So much so, in fact, that companies which demonstrate that they have developed an ethical edge will gain competitive edge in the market, which might be called the business case for business ethics. The oil industry would do well to grasp this insight and become more transparent and forthcoming about the information it has and the progress its making toward increasing the drain interval of engine oil."

The Official Position

Standing astride and guiding the oil industry's effort is its primary trade association, the powerful American Petroleum Institute. It is also responsible for educating consumers about motor oil quality, usage and disposal.

API's downstream general manager, Edward H. Murphy, summed up the oil industry position earlier this year: "Auto manufacturers recommend oil drain intervals for the vast array of vehicles they sell and the many conditions under which they operate. Attempts by individual oil

marketers to issue different oil drain interval requirements could result in consumer confusion, or worse, invalidated warranties."

These are two valuable thoughts, "consumer confusion" and "invalidated warranties."

Auto manufacturers are very conservative with their intervals because warranty claims can be very expensive. Still, the last decade has seen a vast improvement in engine oil quality, which automakers have been centrally involved in through their International Lubricants Standardization and Approvals Committee. The auto makers have responded to this quality explosion in differing ways, but it is fair to say OEMs have not yet fully exploited the high quality of current engine oil with their drain interval recommendations. Why not?

Few consumers would disregard the owner's manual while a vehicle is under warranty, so the threat of "invalidated warranties" seems a red herring. As the Automotive Oil Change Association notes, the U.S. vehicle fleet "is comprised primarily of vehicles 8 to 10 years old without any manufacturer's warranty coverage." In early 2001, Valvoline found, "The average vehicle age in the United States is 8-1/2 years and climbing ... more than 80 million [cars] have been on the road in excess of 11 years ... over 64 percent of the cars on the road have

more than 75,000 miles." Seeing a need, Valvoline was glad to launch a high-mileage oil that taps into consumer concern for ageing engines. Nearly every major brand has followed suit. Cannot the same be done for drain intervals?

The "consumer confusion" which API fears will happen if oil marketers offer drain interval recommendations is already a stark feature of the gasoline engine oil market. None of the major players is working to relieve that confusion.

Their stance — treat consumers like ignorant yokels — ignores the high technical skills of the oil industry, the advances in engine design and materials, the vast improvement in engine oil quality over the past decade, the impact of untreated oil flowing into the environment — and common sense. Too, it is an insult to the ethically and technically rigorous individuals who put their best efforts into every engine oil quality upgrade. ■

Coming Next: Oil Company Perspectives

Among dozens of well-known firms in the lubricants industry, three stand out: Shell, ExxonMobil and Valvoline. Each is a pacesetter, and their public and technical positions carry weight. Together, they control nearly two-thirds of the U.S. engine oil market. Next month, we'll see how each is grappling with the ethics of motor oil consumption.

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