



Think Bigger is Better? Time to Think Again

By Rachel Stern, Science Interchange Reporter

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As the popularity of sport utility vehicles has risen, the advantages have become less apparent. This is why various people and organizations are rallying to get SUVs off the road in attempts to preserve the environment, their safety and their pocketbooks.

The federal Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) set the fuel economy goals for new passenger cars at 27.5 miles per gallon (mpg). The Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975 requires passenger cars and light trucks manufacturers to meet CAFE standards. Under the law, SUVs, characterized as light trucks, only have to achieve 20.7 mpg.

Minivans and SUVs constitute almost half of new car sales, according to studies by the Union of Concerned Scientists (a nonprofit alliance of 50,000 concerned citizens and scientists across the country). Most of them are bought to serve as passenger vehicles.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the better gas mileage a vehicle gets, the less fuel it burns. The less fuel burned means fewer natural resources are used and less pollution is created from the extraction and processing of fuel. In the EPA's 2002 Green Vehicle Guide, the average fuel efficiency for large SUVs is 14 mpg in city driving and 17 mpg in highway driving.

The EPA also says that between 1990 and 1997, greenhouse gas emissions have increased by about 3.4%. About 82% of these emissions are from burning fossil fuels to generate electricity and power our cars.

In addition to being hazardous to the environment, SUVs have proven to be hazardous to people. Their size and design mean that SUVs, vans and light trucks pose a greater threat of death and injury to pedestrians, cyclists and passengers in other vehicles, according to the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. They were deemed dangerous enough that the NHTSA proposed special "High Risk of Rollover" warning labels for them.

Even the safest SUV, the Chevrolet Suburban LX, has at least a 40 percent higher combined risk than the three safest midsize and large cars, the Avalon, Camry, and Accord, states a recent report published in March in the journal of the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy. The authors, Tom Wenzel, an energy analyst with UC Berkeley Lab's Environmental Energy Technologies Division, and Marc Ross, a professor in UC Michigan's Applied Physics Department, wrote that "most cars are safer than the average sports utility vehicle." (Their study is called "An Analysis of Traffic Deaths by Vehicle Type and Model.")

The cost of gas for most cars is less, too. According to the American Automobile Association, a typical 1999 SUV driven 15,000 miles a year for four years costs \$8,072 yearly and nearly 54

cents a mile. This is compared to 47 cents a mile for most 1999 cars. A new SUV driven 20,000 miles will cost close to \$10,000 a year.

Environmentally (and economically) conscious citizens are taking a stand against these unnecessary emissions and trying to educate people about the hazards of SUVs in a variety of surprising ways.

Annette Rau, a graphic designer and resident of Saratoga, California, combined her dislike of SUVs and job together. She created a website called the Anti-SUV Portal, which contains informative facts, cartoons and links to other sites that notify people of SUV dangers.

"Creating the site has made me more aware [of the disadvantages of SUVs]," said Rau. She said that the site, created less than six months ago, has received over a hundred positive (and a few negative) feedback emails. Visitors to the site have acknowledged Rau's influence in swaying them away from buying an SUV.

David Coale, an activist for Bay Area action, is part of a project called the SUV Ticket that designs "tickets" stating environmental damages of SUVs for people to place on the vehicles. This "Notice of Violation" issued by the "Citizens Environmental Police Department" carries in bright red letters the following warning: "Driving an internal combustion auto is hazardous to your health and the health of the planet." It also contains various facts about the downside of these gas-guzzling vehicles.

"We spent a long time trying to make the ticket informative and humorous," said Coale. "It's too easy to make it antagonistic."

Because the tickets are downloaded online, Coale is unaware of how many tickets have been printed and distributed. "It's hard to know how many minds we've changed," said Coale, who recently learned of an organization in New York using his project as an example to start its own version.

"People have to realize that the most damaging thing to the environment is our transportation choices," he said.

RESOURCES

Sustainable Sonoma County has pages concerning a variety of issues related to cars and SUVs: www.sustainablesonoma.org

Katie Alvord's book "Divorce Your Car! Ending the Love Affair with the Automobile": www.amazon.com/gp/product/0865714088/sr=8-1/qid=1146522114/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-6947396-7915119?%5Fencoding=UTF8

Download an SUV ticket at the Bay Area Action website: www.baaction.org/SUVticket/ or check out the Anti-SUV Portal at www.annetteffects.com/suvsuck/ for links to other sites.