

ENVIRONMENT

Program helps clean the air by scrapping older vehicles

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Since its launch six years ago, a program called Car Heaven has been responsible for getting some 45,000 foul-breathed vehicles off Canadian roads and out from behind the barn, and sent them to a far, far better place -- an automotive recycling facility.

The program -- which encourages Canadians to get rid of their worn-out, old-tech polluters and replace them with more modern machinery by offering a free tow and a \$60 tax receipt -- was given a major boost in the spring of 2005 when General Motors came onside and upped the ante to a \$1,000 incentive toward any of its products.

Reading about the demise of these aging, unsafe and incontinent clunkers brought to mind the cartoon by Second World War artist Bill Mauldin that shows a grizzled U.S. 5th Cavalry sergeant, one hand covering his eyes and the other pointing his .45-calibre automatic at the hood of a worn-out and wounded Jeep.

Maulden's cartoon illustrates just how attached we can get to our vehicles and often how loath we are to part with those that have been faithful servants. But he also brings home the reality that, at some point, we have to make the tough decision to "put down" these old family retainers.



Safety is one issue, as their mechanical vitality is sapped and their fabric thins under the weight of mileage and road salt, but also of obvious concern is the impact these tired veterans have on the environment. It is estimated that, in Ontario, 10 to 15 per cent of the province's seven million vehicles generate 50 per cent of its mobile-source emissions.

And that's where programs such as Car Heaven comes in, says Toronto-based program manager Fatima Dharsee.

She says the 45,000 vehicles dealt with nationally by Car Heaven so far have prevented some 32,700 tonnes of greenhouse gases, 19,400 tonnes of carbon monoxide and 5,100 tonnes of smog-causing emissions from being pumped into the air.

Vehicles built today emit almost 100 per cent less smog-forming emissions than they did when regulations began to come into effect in the late 1960s, and 80 to 90 per cent less emissions than they did just a decade ago, which is near enough the average age (actually 8½ years) of the 19 million vehicles on the road in Canada today.

Dharsee explains that today's low-emission vehicles generate approximately 100 times less volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and 44 times less nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions than vehicles of similar size produced before 1988. The average vehicle taken off the road through the program is 33 times more polluting than a modern subcompact car, Car Heaven says.

And further developments will see these numbers cut even further. An Environment Canada study shows NOx and VOCs will be cut 80 per cent and 75 per cent respectively from 1995 levels by 2020. Carbon dioxide will be reduced by 75 per cent. Lead is already virtually gone and sulphur dioxide will be cut by 90 per cent or better due to new low-sulphur fuels.

Properly recycling even junked non-runners through Car Heaven -- various automotive recycling associations are involved in the program -- also helps. Vehicles contain an average of 19 litres of fluids, which can find their way into the environment if the car is just left to rust. Getting rid of it through Car Heaven can result in 76 per cent of the vehicle being recycled.

The reductions in emissions have been impressive, but industry efforts in this area have been matched by improvements in vehicle reliability over the past couple of decades that have allowed their lifespan to be extended significantly. And many frugal Canadians are taking advantage. The majority of the vehicles the Car Heaven program deals with are early 90s models and definitely past their best-before date in emission terms.

Car Heaven was launched in Ontario in 2000 (it should complete its cross-Canada rollout by next year

with the inclusion of Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and is operated by the Clean Air Foundation, with help from major sponsors GM, Imperial Oil and the Ontario Ministry of the Environment. The Clean Air Foundation is a non-profit group whose aim is to develop public engagement programs and new approaches that lead to measurable emissions reductions.

How does the Car Heaven program work? You simply contact it -- at Carheaven.ca or by calling the Ontario branch at 1-888-731-7311 or contacting a GM dealership -- if you have an old vehicle, in any condition, that you want to get rid of. It will send a tow truck to haul it away and give you a charitable tax receipt for \$60.

Most automotive recyclers will actually pay you \$75 to \$100 in cash for a junked vehicle and haul it away, but Dharsee does make the point that dealing with Car Heaven guarantees vehicles are recycled in the most environmentally sound way

If your vehicle is 11 years or older and still on the road, it may be eligible for GM's \$1,000 incentive towards a new vehicle.

Dharsee says research revealed that people sending vehicles to Car Heaven were often buying another used vehicle, which didn't result in quite the impact envisioned for the program. Car Heaven realized it needed to work with a vehicle manufacturer to provide an incentive to move people towards new and inherently cleaner vehicles.

Getting GM onside has "had a phenomenal impact on the program. Our volumes have nearly tripled," she says. More than 20,000 vehicles were recycled in 2006 and it anticipates getting 25,000 vehicles off the road in 2007, up from just a few thousand when it was launched.

Dharsee says a high percentage of vehicle owners involved with Car Heaven were eligible for the GM incentive and that many of these have taken advantage of it. This means that in GM's 1½-year involvement in the program, it has likely sold participants something over 15,000 new fuel-efficient and low-emission vehicles.

That's obviously good for GM, but its involvement has provided a big boost to the whole Car Heaven program, and that would seem to be a good thing too.

Car Heaven's parent, the Clean Air Foundation, and GM were recently awarded a Canadian Automobile Association Pyramid Award of Recognition for their contributions to improving the environment.

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