

Washington Hotline

ered the 1986 model year CAFE standard from 27.5 to 26 mpg in response to petitions from Ford and General Motors, who said they could do no better. The agency must now decide the "maximum feasible level" for the next two years. The criteria for determining that level depends on technological feasibility, the effect of other federal motor vehicle safety standards on fuel economy, the need for the nation to conserve energy, and economic practicality. It is this last factor that stirs debate.

In 1981, fuel economy was the number one consideration of car buyers. But with the nation wallowing in an oil glut, Americans have reverted to form and are buying large cars like there is no tomorrow. And nearly half of those who still put a premium on fuel economy are buying Japanese. Ford and GM say the only way out of this dilemma is to restrict market choices or outsource enough parts to qualify large models as imports.

Either way, it's going to cost the country jobs and revenue, the Big Two say. To which the Center for Auto Safety responds with its usual raspberries and lawsuits. NHTSA must now weigh these comments, again, and come up with a hard number. Bet on 26 mpg.

In a related action on light trucks (pickups, vans and utility vehicles with gross vehicle weight ratings of

Bet on 26 mpg for the 1987 and 1988 CAFE standards.

up to 8500 pounds), NHTSA proposed "composite" CAFE standards of 20.5 to 22 mpg for 1988 models, and 20.5 to 22.5 mpg for 1989 models. As is the case with current standards, manufacturers have the option of meeting either the composite standard for their entire light truck fleet or optional separate standards for their two-wheel- and four-wheel-drive

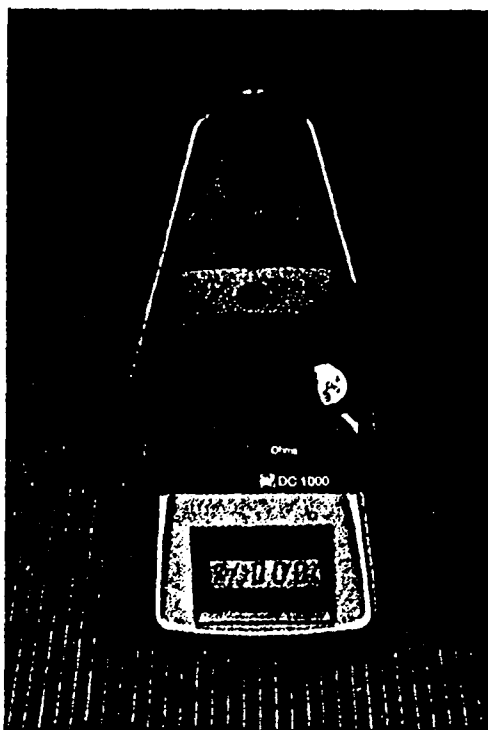
trucks. For 1988 models, the ranges for the optional separate standards are 21 to 22.5 mpg for two-wheel-drive trucks and 19.5 to 21 mpg for four-wheel-drive models. For 1989 models, the ranges are 21 to 23 mpg and 19.5 to 21.5 mpg, respectively.

Asbestos Substitutes

The evils of asbestos have been known for years and, finally, on January 29, 1986, the EPA proposed a ban on the manufacture, importation and processing of asbestos in certain products and a five-year phase-out of the use of asbestos in friction products, which includes most automotive applications.

Despite its carcinogenic side effects, however, the unique combination of properties in asbestos—heat and corrosion resistance, high tensile strength, thermal stability and processability—make it a difficult substance to replace in brake and clutch systems. But EPA points out that substitutes that are nearly as cost-effective as asbestos products have been developed for

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most friction products.

For example, cellulose-based friction components have replaced asbestos in automatic transmissions, and only one of three domestic manufacturers of clutch facings still makes them with asbestos. The others have begun to replace asbestos facings with facings made of fiberglass and textile fibers. Unfortunately, these substitutes are inferior to asbestos facings in durability, quietness and tensile strength, but developments in fiberglass facings and the use of special binders continues to improve its strength, wear and ability to withstand heat. Aramid fiber-based clutch facings are also being developed; the problem is cost.

The EPA also notes that semi-metallic disc brake pads have largely replaced asbestos disc brake pads in new domestic cars with front wheel drive, which accounts for 85% of new domestic cars. In addition, a number of brake manufacturers have begun to introduce an aramid fiber into production of disc brake pads.

But the EPA reports only limited progress in finding substitutes for asbestos in drum brake linings due to problems in processing nonasbestos fibers and in meeting standards of durability and heat resistance. Only one automobile manufacturer is currently using semi-metallic drum brake linings, and only one brake manufacturer has begun marketing aramid fiber-based linings for the replacement market. However, a number of other potential substitute fibers are being tested by both original equipment and replacement manufacturers.

GM Pops Air Bag News

Sitting back watching Mercedes-Benz and Ford make hay, and maybe even sales, with their air bag systems finally got to General Motors Chairman Roger Smith, who announced recently GM will offer driver-side air bags as an option on selected 1988 models.

Smith credited "a new interest in safety" for GM's re-entry into the air bag business (the company sold 10,000 cars with air bags between 1974 and 1976) and said: "We're of-

fering this system in response to what we think our customers want—rather than in response to a government mandate—and that's the way it ought to be."

No price was given for the new air bag system, but it is expected to be competitive with the \$800 charged by Ford and Mercedes. Smith emphasized that the system "will be designed to work with—not in place of—the lap-shoulder belt, which will still be worn by the driver." He also continued to urge pas-

sage of mandatory safety belt laws, which he said are "contributing to public acceptance of restraints of all kinds, including air bags."

Recalls

• NHTSA reports that more than 5.6 million motor vehicles were recalled in 1985 in 173 separate recalls. That's more recall campaigns than the 125 recorded in 1984, but significantly fewer vehicles than the 7.2 million vehicles recalled in 1984. Of last year's actions, 68%, or

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