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Less idling can add up to savings

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Shannon Baker pulled up to a Dutch Bros. coffee stand in downtown Eugene on Tuesday afternoon and placed her order.

Given today's gas prices, it wouldn't have been surprising if she had turned off her engine during the wait. She didn't.

"I think stopping your car and turning it back on uses more fuel than just sitting there," said Baker, 23, of Eugene.

Not necessarily. Local clean-air advocates and businesses are teaming up to send the message that idling in a vehicle for more than a few seconds wastes fuel and hurts the environment. They want the practice discontinued, especially as motorists consider changing a number of driving habits in the face of skyrocketing gas prices.

Research says idling for more than 10 to 30 seconds uses more fuel than turning the engine off and starting it up again, said Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Oregon Toxics Alliance, a health-advocacy organization based in Eugene.

The alliance is promoting the "don't idle" message as part of its Healthy Air campaign, an effort by nonprofits, businesses, governments and others to reduce benzene air pollution. Benzene, a component of gasoline, is cancer-causing and can be especially dangerous for children, Arkin said.

Idling is a triple-threat, Arkin and transportation-industry experts say — it wastes fuel, hurts the environment and can even hurt a vehicle's engine.

Rexius Forest Byproducts, a company in west Eugene that prides itself on environmentally sound operations, has joined the campaign and is launching a no-idle policy for its fleet of 100 trucks, said Arlen Rexius, president of the firm.

The company's truck drivers long had the habit of idling trucks at the start of the day — even up to 45 minutes — assuming they were "warming up" the engine, Rexius said. He blames himself for not recognizing the practice as harmful until Arkin brought it to the company's attention recently.

Rexius estimated that the company could save \$100 to \$200 daily in fuel by keeping engines off until routes begin. All told, Americans go through more than 3 billion gallons of fuel per year just idling in cars and trucks, Arkin said. At today's gas prices, she added, that's \$15 billion up in smoke.

There is debate about whether idling is bad for the engine.

Charles Glasser, a service specialist with AAA Oregon/Idaho, said idling is fine: Today's cars and trucks have fuel-injection systems that precisely mix the air and fuel in the engine, whether it is idling or running at higher levels for driving.

But another businessman in Arkin's campaign, Ed Meza, owner of Swedish Engineering auto repair shop in west Eugene, disagrees.

Idling, especially for longer periods, "builds carbon deposits in the engine," Meza said. "The car is designed to run down the road, not to sit in idle. The fuel doesn't burn off properly (while idling) — you get more sludge and buildup inside the oil and on the valves."

Idling less also helps in the fight against global warming, Arkin said: Studies show that if Oregon and other Western states cut out even five minutes of idling per day, it would prevent the release of 2.2 million tons of carbon dioxide into the air annually.

Whether rising gas prices could change idling habits remains to be seen, but industry experts say anecdotal evidence suggests other driving behaviors have changed.

The Lane Transit District has cited high gas prices and environmental concerns as the reason for an explosion in ridership, which jumped 12.8 percent in the past 12 months.

In Portland, there seems to be a buzz about a thinning-out of rush hour, as high gas prices prompt individuals and companies to shift work schedules to avoid sitting in traffic, said Marie Dodds, spokeswoman for AAA Oregon/Idaho.

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