

WINTER MILEAGE CHALLENGES



Ralph Seekins

As my Alaska Airlines flight from Seattle approached Fairbanks this winter the passenger in my row next to the window asked what “those lights” were off to the right. I peered over his shoulder and found that he was pointing toward the North Pole Refinery. After I identified it, he asked: “They make gasoline up here?” It was his first trip to Alaska.

Relating this story to one of my friends started a long conversation about gasoline, gas mileage and how much it costs here in Alaska. And, somewhere in there he started talking about how his winter miles per gallon were so much lower than they were in summer. Here are some of the things I identified that cause worse gas mileage in our colder months than in the warmer ones.

- Longer idling times to warm up (or keep warm) the engine and interior are probably the biggest killer of fuel mileage. Idling demands a rich fuel/air mixture and all the time it takes for us to defrost the windshields and warm up the interior to keep our fingers from turning numb and our toes to stay warm takes its toll on mileage averages.

- Tire pressure can have an effect. As it gets colder, tire pressure goes down by somewhere between 1 to 2 pounds per square inch for every 10 degrees lower temperature. Lower tire pressure increases rolling resistance which makes your engines burn more fuel to maintain the same speeds. Occasional adjustment of tire pressures can really help save fuel.

- Winter tires also can contribute to reduced miles per gallon. The more aggressive tread patterns on winter tires causes more rolling resistance which, once again, makes the engine work harder to maintain speeds.

- As lubricating fluids – i.e., motor oil, transmission fluid, gear lubricants, power steering fluid – get cold, they suffer from increased friction. Fluids are harder to pump and gears require more energy to roll over until they warm up. That resistance burns more fuel.

- Today’s sophisticated computerized engine control systems adjust the fuel/air mixture so that the most efficient mixtures are present at full operating temperature. The colder it is, the longer it takes to get to the optimum operating temperature. And, for short trips in cold weather, an engine might not ever get fully warmed up.

Bottom line – you and I are simply going to experience lower fuel mileage in our winter months than we will during the warmer summer months. But there are some things you can do to minimize the drop.

- Plan ahead. Get all your errands done as close to one time as possible. Warming up once rather than time after time will help a great deal.

- Keep your vehicle’s tire pressure checked and adjusted as temperatures change. I highly recommend replacing the compressed air in your vehicle’s tires with more temperature stable nitrogen gas – readily available around town these days.

- Avoid jack rabbit starts and stops. I believe most drivers today can increase their fuel mileage by 1-2 miles per gallon by simply adopting a more conservative driving style.

- Install a block heater and transmission pan heater to pre-warm your vehicle when it is parked outside. You’ll more than recover the expense with increased fuel mileage.

Some of these same tips will help you increase your summer fuel efficiency as well. God bless and safe driving for you and your family.

Ralph Seekins has more than 42 years’ experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past 36 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln.