

Why and when to preheat before starting



Ralph Seekins

A newly assigned manufacturer representative recently visited our Fairbanks dealership. And, as we often hear from first time visitors to Alaska: "What are the little blue cords sticking out of all the grills?" Our standard answer: "It's how we preheat the engines in cold weather."

On my own truck, that little blue cord is made of braided copper wires encased in a special cold weather rubber compound that stays flexible so it won't break off when I plug it in during super cold weather. It is attached to an engine block heater, an engine oil sump heater, a transmission sump heater and a battery heater for each battery. When something else is parked in my garage space and I have to park outside (it happens) and it's 20 above or colder, I plug these heaters in an hour or more (depending on temperature) before I'm ready to go to the office. Why? Because the truck will start easier, the cab will warm up quicker and the lubrication will reach the moving parts more quickly than if it is started without preheating.

Today's vehicles commonly use multi-viscosity engine oil. For

example, my wife's Expedition uses a 5W20 synthetic blend. It flows more easily at cold temperatures so the oil gets to moving parts quickly at start-up yet it protects the engine parts at higher operating temperatures. However, even that premium blended motor oil moves slower into the engine when it is cold soaked and every revolution without an oil cushion contributes to less engine longevity. Because the engine block heater brings up the coolant temperature and the oil pan sump heater warms the oil pooled at the bottom of the engine, the oil will get to the internal moving parts more quickly – a much better scenario for the mechanical components than just starting when cold soaked. Likewise, warming the transmission fluid before moving down the road protects the internal parts of that assembly and helps assure a longer life for this expensive component.

Several of my friends have simple timers set up on the outlets used to plug in their vehicle heaters. One guy I know heads to work at about 7:30 so he has his outlet timer set for 5:30. He wisely uses only the electricity he needs to get the job done. Two hours of warming and, when he starts up his car, the interior heater gets right to work, the defroster quickly cleans the windshield and he can take off almost as soon as he starts the engine.

So, here's what I recommend: Get the right cold weather equipment installed on your vehicle. Some models require different equipment. Your vehicle manufacturer's dealer can give you sound advice about what is best. Then, make sure you have the proper lubricants that are formulated for our Interior Alaska temperature extremes. Again, your manufacturer's dealer is the best resource for this information. Or, please feel free to stop by our QuickLane Tire and Auto Center and we'll be glad to give you a no obligation consultation. Then, if you park outside for long periods of time, and the temperature is 20 degrees above or colder, get an outlet timer and set it for an hour or two (longer when it's colder) than when you need to get going. Your vehicle will run better and longer, will be a whole lot more comfortable and so will you.

Easier starting, less cold weather damage and quicker interior warm-ups – all good reasons to plug in during our winter months.

Ralph Seekins has more than 41 years' experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past

34 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln, Inc.

If you have an automotive question you'd like answered, forward it to ralphs@seekins.com.