LUBE TECHNI-GRAM

F R O M :

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Current Industry News

Oil Sludge Continues to Plague Numerous Automotive Manufacturers

In an effort to address engine problems caused by oil sludge, Volkswagen of America recently extended warranty coverage on two models of turbocharged cars, news reports say.

According to Automotive News and the Wall Street Journal, the U.S. subsidiary of the German automaker has mailed letters to owners of approximately 425,000 Volkswagen Passats and Audi A4s equipped with 1.8-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engines. The company sent the letters after receiving complaints of components malfunctioning because of oil sludge.

Automotive News, a weekly trade newspaper, reported Monday that the extended warranty covers Passats built from 1998 to 2004 and A4s built from 1997 to 2004. The paper said VW declined to say how many engines have been replaced or repaired or how much the extended warranty is expected to cost.

VW is not the only carmaker to fork over money the past few years for oil-related engine problems. Toyota Motor Sales U.S.A. begrudgingly offered in 2002 to pay for repairs to engines damaged by oil gelation, a solid gel that fails to flow. Toyota maintained that problems in its engines were caused by owners who did not change oil often enough, but made its offer after receiving complaints from a few thousand customers.

The Center for Auto Safety has announced that it is asking DaimlerChrysler to extend warranties on Chrysler 2.7-liter V-6 engines in vehicles built from 1998 to 2002 to address problems caused by oil sludge. The center, a private, non-profit group founded by Ralph Nader (currently a third-party candidate for president in the United States), said it has received complaints from 92 Chrysler owners claiming damaged related to oil sludge.

Automotive News reported Chrysler as stating it is investigating a "limited" number of complaints.

"Check engine" light rarely associated with engine oil.

On occasion, vehicle operators have reported observing the "check engine" light having come on after changing brands of oil. These reports are difficult to investigate in the field as the concern either disappears by itself, or a problem is corrected by engine service. There is simply no rhyme or reason that different brands of the same viscosity grade of engine oil would have an effect on the "check engine" light.

The “Check Engine” light is a small rectangle hidden among the gauges clustered on the instrument panel behind the steering wheel. It flashes briefly when you turn the ignition on…along with other system checks like anti-lock brakes…to let you know the system is ready to perform its prescribed job.

After briefly flashing at start-up indicating all is well, it is blank and dormant as you drive happily on your way. Then one day, inexplicably, it glows yellow and warns, “Check Engine.” What do you check and why? The engine shows no obvious signs of anything except running down the road in quite contentment.

The Environmental Protection Agency and the California Air Resources Board established regulations requiring on-board diagnostics systems on cars and light duty trucks (pickups, vans and SUVs) beginning with the 1994 model year. All ’96 and newer cars and trucks have a powerful computer with uses second-generation on-board diagnostics, or OBDII technology. The purpose of the OBDII system is to ensure proper emission-control system operation for vehicle’s lifetime by monitoring emission related components and systems for deterioration and malfunction.

When the OBDII system determines that an emission problem exists, the computer illuminates the dashboard light indicating “Service Engine Soon” or “Check Engine” or displays an engine symbol. This light, usually yellow in color, serves to inform the driver that a problem has been detected and vehicle service is needed.

Warning Signs

OBDII assesses engine misfire situations, the most severe of which indicated the possibility that the catalytic converter is in danger of overheating. When this occurs, the yellow “check engine” light will blink on and off. Don’t hit the panic button and stop the car when the yellow message starts flashing. However, it is important to reduce the speed of the vehicle, and take it to a dealership for service as soon as possible. The vehicle should not be driven long distances with the light flashing.

The system is continuously checking information from the engine and transmission sensors against data stored in its memory. When one of the hundreds of faults is found, the check engine light comes on and stays on. This can mean many things, from an oxygen sensor malfunction, to a dirty filter, or a fouled spark plug. A not uncommon cause for the light to illuminate is a loose gas cap. Check to make sure it is tightened properly, and if that’s the cause, the dashboard light will go out after several trips.

If the problem that caused the light to come on disappears after a few trips…perhaps a fouled spark plug has cleared…the OBDII will turn the light off. This is not an indication of a faulty system. In fact, the system is doing its job to verify that a problem existed and was caused by a temporary problem, which has gone away. Your car needs no special attention unless the light comes on again.

The glitches that activate the “check engine” light are often nothing a driver can readily detect, but that doesn’t mean everything is working properly. There can be a condition that wastes fuel, shortens engine life or could lead to expensive repairs if left unaddressed. And, since the condition is usually emission related, the level of pollutants coming from the tailpipe can soar.

So, if the check engine light comes on, don’t hit the panic button, but don’t disregard it, either.