

Demonizing SUVs lets the real devils go free

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Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs) have received much blame for the extravagant fuel use in North America that has helped put the world price of crude oil into orbit. There's no doubt that the popular, oversized, and overpowered SUVs use obscene amounts of fuel to move their often solitary drivers through conditions no more rugged than an urban expressway.

But it's also true that SUVs are responsible for only a fraction of North American oil use and for an even smaller fraction of recent growth in oil use. More responsibility goes to dramatic increases in heavy-duty truck activity and in the power and weight of all kinds of road vehicles.

SUVs have been demonized, and like many demons they're thought to be more prevalent than they really are. They actually comprise about 8 per cent of personal vehicles on the road. Their number has doubled in the past decade, but there are still many fewer SUVs on Canadian roads than there are regular automobiles (63 per cent of the total), pickup trucks (16 per cent), and vans (13 per cent).

On average, SUVs and pickups use about 45 per cent more fuel per kilometre than regular cars while carrying the same number of people per vehicle. Vans, which use the same amount of fuel, carry 20 per cent more people on average (not enough to offset their higher fuel use). So SUVs, pickups, and vans all deserve to be called fuel hogs.

Transport is the only use of oil that's growing in Canada. Moving people accounts for about 60 per cent of transport-fuel use; moving freight is responsible for the other 40 per cent. Fuel use for moving people has been growing only at the rate of population growth (1.1 per cent a year). Fuel use for moving freight has grown at three times this rate, largely because of the increase in heavy truck activity. Between 1990 and 2002, fuel use by heavy trucks increased by 76 per cent. It would have been much more, but for efficiencies in fuel consumption and truck logistics. Despite these improvements, trucking accounts for more than two-thirds of the recent growth in Canada's total oil use, even though it is responsible for less than a third of the actual use.

There have been no recent changes in the fuel economy of private vehicles, up or down. The automotive industry achieved remarkable improvements in fuel-use technology during the past two decades, but it has all gone toward making cars and other personal vehicles heavier and more powerful, rather than reducing their fuel use. Average vehicle weights have increased by 25 per cent since 1984 -- and average engine power has increased by 91 per cent! If weight and power had stayed unchanged over the past two decades, Canadians would be using only about half the amount of fuel they now use in their personal vehicles, with no sacrifice in comfort, convenience or safety. So: SUVs, pickups, and vans are fuel hogs, but so are regular automobiles in terms of what they could be.

Demonizing SUVs distracts us from the bigger issues of the weight and power of all personal vehicles -- and from the even more important issue of truck activity.

Higher oil prices will force changes in transport fuel use. Most of this will occur as new vehicles replace existing vehicles, and it now takes about seven years for half the vehicles on the road to be retired. Manufacturers can move quite nimbly in response to consumer demand and government action. Between 1975 and 1980, when manufacturing techniques were less flexible, the average fuel use of new personal vehicles fell by a third in response to fuel-price concerns.

Governments should step up the pressure to ensure that Canadians are as well prepared as possible for \$2-a-litre gasoline. They can do this by requiring manufacturers to make their products more fuel-efficient, providing incentives to purchase highly efficient vehicles, and even raising fuel taxes. How to curb the growth in truck activity without harming the economy is the bigger challenge.

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