

Car towing capacity drops 99% since 1970s

by Bend Weekly News Sources

SUV Owners Group Releases New Consumer Towing Guide

The shift in consumer preference to SUVs and light trucks for family transportation was driven not just by the desire for better comfort and safety -- since 1970 fuel economy mandates that resulted in downsized vehicles caused 99 percent of cars to lose their ability to tow basic recreational equipment, Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America (SUVOA) announced today.

"The gutting of car towing capacity should be a wake up call that major lifestyle consequences could loom large as the nation contemplates the next wave of energy policy changes," SUVOA President Barry W. McCahill said. "The threat is on several fronts -- California's carbon dioxide law and the 10 states that have chosen to follow suit; the Supreme Court's upcoming decision on the regulation of carbon dioxide; and proposed federal legislation to increase federal fuel economy standards."

"Achieving better fuel economy and energy independence are critical national imperatives. But let's do it in a thoughtful, balanced way that ensures millions of Americans won't lose their outdoor lifestyle," he added. It is estimated that there are more than 20 million recreation and utility towables in the United States.

In the 1970s, before the federal program to regulate automotive fuel economy was enacted, some 70 percent of domestic passenger car models could tow a small fishing boat or camping trailer weighing 2,100 pounds. Today, just one percent of cars can handle that load, and many popular recreational tows weigh considerably more.

"If towing a boat or camp trailer is part of your lifestyle, or may be in the future, you need to consider carefully what vehicle you purchase. Cars and even many of the popular new crossover SUVs can't do the job," he said.

SUVOA posted a new towing guide on its web site (<http://www.suvoa.com/>) complete with illustrations to help consumers match 2007 tow vehicles to popular RVs, boats and other recreational equipment that need to be towed. The guide is the first of its kind in that it also includes all 2007 passenger vehicles, safety tips and illustrations, links to other towing-related sites, and is available free to the public at <http://www.suvoa.com/>.

"Regrettably, federal auto policy doesn't always consider the tradeoffs that exist among national goals. One day the focus is on new safety requirements. The next, it's on tougher emissions controls. Today, it's on both those and improving fuel economy and they are often at odds with each other," McCahill said.

"All are important. But meeting them creates performance and design conflicts and tradeoffs," he continued. "The loss of car towing capacity and reductions in safety because of vehicle downsizing are unfortunate historical evidence of what can happen."

Derrick Crandall, President and CEO of the American Recreation Coalition agreed that while fuel prices and the desire to decrease dependence on imported oil are now center stage, decisions being made today, if too extreme, could have serious consequences for outdoor recreation.

"If the poll question is, 'Do you want better fuel economy?' who doesn't?" But if you ask if they are willing to give up vehicles that can transport the whole family comfortably and safely, and pull a boat or other RV on weekends, you likely will get a very different answer," Crandall said.

"Ironically, the only vehicles left that enable people to enjoy the great outdoors -- SUVs and pickups -- are under attack and could also lose towing capacity. Nobody intended to kill off the station wagon that was the mainstay for family transportation and recreation. But it happened," Crandall said.

"Federal policies should encourage outdoor recreation, and a big part of it is making sure that we preserve the kinds of vehicles that can carry people, gear and the various RVs, boats and other towables that people enjoy to their favorite outdoor destinations," Crandall said.

He pointed to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data showing dramatic increases over the past 20 years in obesity and diabetes, attributed mainly to eating habits and lack of exercise. The Transportation Research Board states: "... physical inactivity is a major, largely preventable threat to health."

According to Richard Coon, President of the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA), towing ability is part of the outdoor lifestyle and must be preserved. "Even with higher fuel prices, American families are buying RVs in record numbers. Why? Because they want to stay closer to home and avoid commercial travel hassles, and have discovered the value. For about the price of one or two traditional family vacations, they can have fun adventures in their RV whenever and wherever they choose, and for many years to come. And, towed RVs are the most popular choice."

Coon said there are more than 11 million trailer boats and 5 million trailer RVs in use in the U.S. There are

millions more horse, snowmobile, ATV and personal watercraft trailers. Safe towing demands attention to the vehicle manufacturer's stated towing capacity; number of occupants in the tow vehicle; total weight of what is being towed (including fuel, water, and gear); and proper hitch configuration.

The SUVOA Towing Guide points out that more consumer education on towing is needed because many towing situations dangerously exceed motor vehicle manufacturer and RV dealer recommendations. For example, according to the RV Safety & Education Foundation, 49 percent of travel trailers are towed in excess of the tow vehicle's recommended maximum capacity, also known as gross combined weight rating.

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