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EcoConsumer

Safe, durable tires also good for environment

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By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

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Q: Let's start with that daily use. Tires play a major role in fuel economy, right?

A: Absolutely. The latest "low rolling resistance" (LRR) tires allow a vehicle to use less energy going down the road, which can increase fuel efficiency by more than 4 percent and save you \$100 a year on gas. Most tire manufacturers now offer LRR tires.

Q: Do these fuel-efficient tires cost more?

A: In recent tire ratings by Consumer Reports, most of the tires rated best for LRR were priced comparably to tires that did not score well on rolling resistance.

Q: Is there a trade-off between fuel-efficient tires and safe tires?

A: There shouldn't be. Safety is always the top priority when considering tires, and Consumer Reports found that several of the best LRR tires also performed well on safety tests for braking and handling.

Q: Can tires be green in other ways?

A: As with any product, well-made, durable tires are better for the environment because they last longer, conserving resources and reducing waste. The tire industry also is diligently developing ways to use greener raw materials. The manufacture of a single tire typically consumes seven gallons of petroleum, but Michelin and other tire makers have begun using alternative materials such as sunflower oil.

Retreading, which reuses the bulk of the tire, is the original green tire strategy. Common 40 years ago, retreaded tires for passenger cars have become nearly extinct because of changes in the

design and marketing of consumer tires. Many trucks and even school buses still roll on retreads, however, and modern retreaded tires are considered as safe as new tires.

Q: Besides buying greener tires, what can I do?

A: Invest in a decent tire gauge, usually under \$20, and check your tire pressure once a month. Underinflated tires on passenger cars and light trucks in the U.S. result in the waste of 1.2 billion gallons of fuel per year, because of increased resistance of the tires. Improper tire inflation also compromises safety and shortens tire life.

The right amount of air for your car's tires should be posted on the car (often on the door edge or glove box door) and in the owner's manual. Because tires heat up, always check the pressure when the car has not been driven farther than a mile in the past few hours.

Even if your car is equipped with a tire-pressure monitoring system, you should still check your tires regularly, including the spare. The federal government's www.safercar.gov/Tire website offers great tips on tire maintenance.

Q: I almost hate to ask, but where do tires go when they die?

A: Ideally, they get recycled into products such as boat bumpers or athletic field surfaces. Tires are also burned for fuel at cement plants. Before buying tires, make sure the retailer will recycle or properly dispose of your old ones.

If you have tires to get rid of, find collection locations on King County's "What Do I Do With?... " website (your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste/wdidw) or statewide call 800-RECYCLE (800-732-9253) weekdays 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. A fee will be charged, usually \$5-10 per tire.

Illegal tire piles are a fire hazard, and water that collects in tires attracts mosquitoes. Here in Washington state, government agencies have made substantial progress in recent years cleaning up piles of old tires.

Once the least green product around, tires have changed and are well on their way to becoming standard equipment on the green bandwagon.

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