

Toyota tops in 'green' plastics use
Study: No automaker earned higher than a 'C'
The Associated Press
updated 6:08 p.m. ET, Wed., Feb. 23, 2005

DETROIT - Toyota Motor Corp. was tops in a new study of the leading automakers' use of nontoxic, recyclable plastics in their vehicles sold in the United States, though no one received a grade higher than a "C."

The study by the Ecology Center, a nonprofit activist organization based in Ann Arbor, graded the six top-selling automakers in the United States on their commitment to using environmentally friendly, sustainable plastics.

The report, done in collaboration with the nonprofit Clean Production Action of Spring Brook, N.Y., was released Wednesday in conjunction with the Global Plastic Environmental Conference in Atlanta.

Sustainable plastics are defined as those that don't contain toxic chemicals and are recyclable and manufactured from renewable raw materials. Toyota's use earned it a grade of C, while General Motors Corp., Ford Motor Co., DaimlerChrysler AG, Honda Motor Co. and Nissan Motor Co. all received D's or D-pluses.

"Toyota is the clear leader in integrating safer and environmentally friendly plastics into its automobiles and has implemented many practices that U.S. automakers can learn from," said Charles Griffith, the Ecology Center's auto project director. "But the fact the top performer received a C grade means there's still a lot of room for improvement across the board."

The report also found that some foreign automakers fare better in the use of sustainable plastics because the U.S. government lags behind Japan and the European Union in recycling requirements. It said GM has acknowledged it focuses more on sustainable plastics through its overseas subsidiaries such as Opel and Vauxhall.

"There's a double standard," Griffith said. "Why should a GM car in Europe have safer, more environmentally friendly plastic than one in the U.S.? Automakers need to provide environmentally safe plastics to consumers equally across the globe."

GM, however, questioned the methods used in creating the report and said its global standards are consistent and designed to enhance recyclability, provide guidance on using recycled content and restrict the use of hazardous substances.

"We share and encourage these standards with our suppliers to `green the supply chain,'" GM spokeswoman Joanne Krell said.

The amount of plastics used in vehicles increased from 0.6 percent in 1960 to 7.5 percent in 2003, accounting for 4.3 billions pounds of plastic annually in the United States alone, the Ecology Center said.

The report found that all six automakers still rely heavily on petrochemical-based plastics, many of which release toxic chemicals and are difficult to recycle. A prime example of an unsustainable plastic is PVC, which is made of fossil fuels and chlorine and is found in products such as dashboards and exterior trim.

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