

Escape to Fuel Efficiency?



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

It's been a long time since I've owned a conventional, internal combustion engine car made by one of the major American auto manufacturers. We've had an assortment of energy efficient cars in recent years, including two General Motors EV1 electric cars, a hybrid Prius, and now an electric Nissan Leaf.

While we drive an electric car around the Bay Area, we do keep a conventionally powered SUV for trips to the mountains. There

is no electric SUV in existence, and a Tesla SUV that is supposed to come online in the next couple of years, the Model X, will be well above our price range. There is currently no hybrid SUV with significantly better gas mileage than vehicles with a conventional engine.

So when I needed to replace our old SUV in December, I wanted to find one with the best gas mileage possible. A family member suggested that I look at a new line of Fords with the "EcoBoost" engine. These cars are equipped with a four-cylinder, gas-powered engine, built in Valencia, Spain, designed to be ultra-efficient. I took a look and was duly impressed by these cars' aesthetics, functions and estimates of fuel efficiency.

I leased a Ford Titanium Escape SUV with the 2.0L 4WD EcoBoost engine, which is a beautiful car. Since December, I've noticed an increasing number of the EcoBoost cars on the road, both the Escape SUV and the Ford Fusion sedan. But is this new line of cars with conventional engines all it is cracked up to be? Is it a greener alternative among the various options available for environmentally sounder vehicles? Is it an effective stake by one of the major American car companies in the market for fuel-efficient vehicles with long driving ranges?

The Ford Escape EcoBoost is an incredibly well-designed machine, with amazing electronics and safety systems. It practically thinks for itself. The hands-free communication system that pairs with numerous digital devices, sensors all over the outside to warn of possible hazards, and the hands-free cargo door that opens when you wave your foot under the bumper are just a few of the smart features. Cargo space is capacious, and it drives nicely. Ford

gets high points for adopting the best of available technology and design, something for which American cars have not been noted in recent years.

But what about the key advertised feature, the fuel efficiency? The 2.0 liter four-wheel-drive EcoBoost engine is advertised at 22 mpg for city driving and 30 mpg on the highway. To achieve these results, which would be about 30 percent better than my old Mercedes SUV results of 15 mpg city and 20 mpg on the highway, designers of the EcoBoost Escape have taken some smart guidance from electric and hybrid vehicle design. The car has been designed with lighter-weight interiors, including thinner but still comfortable seats. It has a small gas tank – only 15 gallons – to cut down on the weight of carrying around all that fuel. And it has an aerodynamic, swept-back design to decrease wind resistance.

But we pretty quickly noticed that the Escape didn't seem to be getting the advertised mileage. Tanks of gas vanished quickly, even after factoring out the small size of the gas tank, which accentuates the impression that one is constantly refilling the tank.

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There is some discussion online of whether the EcoBoost engine gets the projected mileage. Some auto review sites recommend switching from regular to premium gas to optimize the fuel efficiency by about 3 mpg. Other drivers opine that it takes some thousands of miles to break in the new engine, after which the gas mileage will go up. Others suggest having the car checked by the service department at one's Ford dealership.

So are the advertised claims for fuel efficiency for the EcoBoost engine an example of "greenwashing" – exaggerated claims of environmental friendliness by a major car manufacturer trying to win back market share from Toyota, Nissan and other companies that have led in the race to greater energy efficiency? It's too early to tell. Our car is about to go to the dealership for its first service, and we will ask questions about the fuel mileage then. And of course we will continue to drive our electric car to the maximum extent possible.

Even if the fuel mileage of the EcoBoost is not all it has been cracked up to be, Ford is on the right path. It's especially smart to borrow back design features from the low- and zero-emissions car industry. This is only the second year of the EcoBoost engine, and Ford will continue to evolve and improve the design of these vehicles. And any improvement in automobile fuel efficiency helps, given the increasing evidence of climate change and the imperative to reduce carbon emissions. 🌱