

SO CAL RAIL UPDATE

by Richard F. Tolmach

Last year, in CRN's random collection of transportation follies, we reported on General Motors plan to save the company by building more of its largest models of SUV. This year's news bulletin is that GM is trying to cut back on big SUVs, but has moved too slowly to avoid financial disaster.

The U.S. auto industry's current turmoil has been well documented in the press, but until recently, few accounts gave details about the connection between energy prices and the mix of vehicles in the U.S. fleet.

Four years ago, in 2002, trucks and SUVs overtook autos in US sales for the first time. This summer, the balance is looking to tilt the other way. In May 2006, the trend was already evident, with a 49:51 car-truck ratio compared to a 46:54 ratio a year before.

Toyota had its strongest month ever in May, with sales up 17 percent, cars up 25 percent and light trucks up 6.6 percent. Toyota's car-to-truck ratio in May 2006 was 61:39, up from 58:42 in May 2005. By comparison, GM was down 12 percent, with a car-truck ratio of 38:62 compared to 40:60 in May 2005. Ford 30:70 in 2005, 37:63 in 2006.

In July, double-digit declines were the rule for SUV builders, while brands that specialize in small, efficient autos, such as Honda, Isuzu, Suzuki, and Toyota eked out double-digit gains. Ford and Chrysler both had declines in the range of 35 percent.

Ford announced August sales declines of 12 percent and 4th Quarter production cuts in which light trucks will drop by 29 percent, while cars will drop by 5 percent. Toyota's August increase was 17 percent, to 240,178, on strength of Corolla sales and its new Yaris subcompact, leaving Ford ahead by less than 15,000, about 6 percent.

General Motors Corp. sales rose for the first time since January, primarily because August 2005 sales were hurt by low inventory. GM put the best spin it could on the matter, pointing to growth in sales of its new 30mpg and above models.

WHY WEIGHT MATTERS

US cars have a disproportionate effect upon global warming because they are heavier, less efficient, and driven more miles than cars elsewhere in the world, according to a report by Environmental Defence.

Americans drive 202 million out of 683 million vehicles worldwide. The average US vehicle, with a fuel economy of less than 20mpg, travels 11,000 miles a year, nearly a third more than cars elsewhere, according to the report, Global Warming on the Road.

As suburban sprawl far outpaces the growth of public transit Americans commute more each year, shop more, and drive further to the shops each time. From 1990 to 2001 shopping vehicle miles rose by 40 percent.

The study found that although the boom in sports utility vehicles (SUVs) has ended because of oil costs, the effect upon U.S. fuel consumption will persist for years. The behemoth Ford Excursions, Hummers, and Chevrolet Suburbans of the last five years may represent a fatter slice of the U.S. fleet, as older, smaller cars are discarded.

More SUVs are sold in the US than any other type of car, overtaking small cars in 2002. The report predicted SUVs "soon will be the main source of automotive CO₂ emissions" spewing equivalent to 55 large coal-fired power plants.

"The fuel economy of US vehicles has been declining since 1988, which means the CO₂ emissions have been increasing, associated with a shift to large trucks," said John DeCicco, one of the report's authors.

While autos produce a tenth of green-

house gas emissions elsewhere in the world, American cars are responsible for 20% of US energy-related emissions.

BRITISH INSULT SUVs

Criticism of SUVs and their owners in Britain has far exceeded that in the US, perhaps because they are a minority there. A record 187,000 SUVs were sold in 2005 in the U.K., but that was only 15 percent of vehicles.

British energy minister Malcolm Wicks said recently: "There will come a time when it will be irresponsible for [SUVs] to be on sale." London Mayor, Ken Livingstone has lambasted urban owners as "complete idiots." Host Jeremy Clarkson of the BBC show *Top Gear*, called them "clinically insane."

Research at Imperial College, London, published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) found passengers in an SUV may be less exposed to danger than those in smaller vehicles, but their drivers increase risk of injury to everyone on the road by failure to observe ordinary safety measures.

The BMJ article's authors amplified this: "Our data show a worryingly high level of non-compliance with laws on seat belts and hand-held mobile phones by drivers in London. Our observation that almost one in six drivers was not wearing a seat belt is a public health concern."

Researchers found drivers of SUVs about four times more likely to be seen using hand-held cell phones, illegal by drivers in Britain. They were also less likely to use seat belts. Drivers who broke one law, on using a cell phone or not using a seat belt, were more likely also to break the other. The article cites "risk compensation," in which perceptions of safety incite riskier behavior.

VW AND MINI HUMOR

As it did so successfully in the 1960's, VW is using humor in new ads positioning itself as the alternative to SUVs. The current campaign for Passat claims that the small sedan has "low ego emissions," a notable problem of certain larger cars. VW's new Rabbit poses as a "Rabbit Transit System," with an NYCTA-styled map graphic.

For several years, MiniCooper has run campaigns that tout its modest appetite for gasoline. The latest is a billboard series that announces "Big Vehicles We Feel Your Pain."

This year, gas cost is a great issue to convince motorists to try something new. Unfortunately, with one or two exceptions, California rail systems have generally avoided any such focus in their marketing.

AMTRAK BOARD PICKS NEW PRES.

Amtrak President Alexander Kummant's views on trains are so unknown that passenger groups are hesitant to leap to conclusions about his agenda, despite his tenure at Union Pacific as a regional vice president.

A native of Ohio, Kummant holds a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering from Case Western Reserve University, a Master's degree in manufacturing engineering from Carnegie Mellon University and an M.B.A. from Stanford University. He is married to Kathleen Regan Kummant, a former senior executive with the Santa Fe and BNSF railroads.

One of the few officials to comment was Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who said, "It's good they finally appointed someone, but given this administration's record on Amtrak, we need to know whether he was brought in to build up Amtrak or tear it down."

TRAC FORGES TIES WITH PCL, OTHER ECOLOGY GROUPS

Public transit advocates and environmentalists work in concert because both groups recognize the environmental and other damage caused by excessive energy consumption, and because of the threat highway-induced sprawl poses to habitat, parks and other open spaces.

The Train Riders Association of California (TRAC) and the PCL have been working together on projects of common interest ever since the late 1980s when the two organizations developed and, together with the Sierra Club and many other organizations, successfully promoted State Proposition 116, the public transit bond issue that was approved by California voters on June 5, 1990.

Later, when a high-speed rail system was proposed for California, a powerful coalition of environmental groups from throughout California formed under the aegis of the PCL. The purpose of the new coalition, the California High Speed Rail Environmental Coalition (CA-HSREC), was to monitor the development of HSR in order to make certain that it evolved in a manner that was both conducive to good transportation and protective of parks and other open spaces.

Elements of the High Speed Rail system are currently being analyzed as part of the Bay Regional Rail Study (BRRS) under the direction of MTC and three other sponsoring agencies—the Peninsula Joint Powers Board, BART and the California High Speed Rail Authority. Since the purpose of the Study is to lay out a future passenger rail network for the Greater Bay Area, including a high-speed route link to the San Joaquin Valley, the stakes are high.

To keep track of ongoing work the PCL and the CA-HSREC sought and won a seat on the Special BRRS Advisory Committee established to monitor and evaluate Study findings. TRAC's President, Jerry Cauthen, is serving as CA-HSREC's representative on the Advisory Committee.

TRAC will continue to work closely with the PCL and other environmental groups to further the integrated network of fast trains, supported by efficient bus feeder systems, needed in order for California to reduce its currently excessive dependence on auto-motive forms of travel.

California Rail News

Published 4 times annually by the California Rail Foundation in cooperation with the Train Riders Association of California

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Signed articles represent the views of their authors, not necessarily those of the above organizations.

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