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Car buyers want more emphasis on MPG on car eco-labels

The age of austerity is leading UK car buyers to rate miles-per-gallon (MPG) data equally as important as CO₂ emissions when it comes to purchasing decisions.

A new survey, published by the Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership (LowCVP) highlights the importance that new car buyers attribute to fuel economy as both a factor in choosing a car and in understanding a car's environmental impact.

Dr Ben Lane of Ecolane, one of the partners that conducted the survey on behalf of LowCVP, said: "The fuel price peaks in 2008 followed by the 'credit crunch' have placed fuel economy at the centre of many car buying decisions and, in doing so, accelerated the reduction of new car CO₂ emissions."

Tellingly, the survey reveals that car buyers assume that the best way to improve fuel economy is to buy a smaller car. In cases where a larger vehicle is required, few car buyers are motivated to search for fuel efficient models, as they underestimate the range in fuel economy performance within each vehicle class.

When asked what factors are most important when purchasing a car, the survey finds that consumers give highest priority to 'fuel economy/running costs', 'size/practicality', and 'vehicle price'.

Most new cars now display the UK fuel economy label, which shows CO₂ emissions, fuel cost for 12,000 miles and VED band (the price of a tax disc). The new study shows that consumers also want MPG information on the label, alongside CO₂ emissions.

Consumers respond very positively to the colour banded format used on the current UK Fuel Economy Label. However, the survey found that many car buyers would welcome the addition of MPG data and 'best in class' information to the label.

Ben Lane added: "While the current UK fuel economy label has a very strong design element, the survey suggests that it could be improved by displaying the fuel economy information alongside the CO₂ emissions information at the top of the label.

"Many car buyers would also find comparative 'in class' fuel economy data very useful in helping them select the most fuel-efficient models available."

Notes to Editors

The report makes a total of eight recommendations, which include:

- *Car buyers should be better informed about the large range of fuel economy performance values within each vehicle class and, if possible, the financial implications of buying a 'best in class' car.¹*
- *Fuel economy information (in terms of 'mpg') should be made more prominent (through better positioning and larger text-size) than it is on the current UK Fuel Economy Label.*
- *Consideration should be given to adding 'best in class' information (with a focus on 'best in class' fuel economy), while at the same time balancing the possible benefits of doing so with the equally important risk of overloading consumers with too much information.*

For further details of the survey's findings, including the full set of recommendations, a copy of the Executive Summary in PDF format is now available for download from the LowCVP website www.lowcvp.org.uk and look under Resources Library.

The final report entitled 'LowCVP Car Buyer Survey: Improved environmental information for consumers' will be launched at the 2010 LowCVP Annual Conference on July 14-15 at the Twickenham Stadium, London. Following a presentation of the findings at the Conference, the full report in PDF format will be made available online.

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About the survey

The Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership commissioned Ecolane and Sustain to undertake new research to assess the importance of environmental issues at point of purchase, to identify what information relating to the environmental performance of cars is most easily understood by car buyers, and to ascertain consumer preferences for how such information should be presented.

Qualitative consumer data was collected through a series of structured discussions with car buyers who had either recently bought a new or nearly-new car (less than 2 years of age), or were planning to make a purchase in the next 12 months. Six focus groups involving 52 participants were hosted in London, Birmingham and Bristol during February and March 2010. In parallel, a quantitative web-based survey of around 1,000 car buyers was conducted over the same period.

¹ The authors of the report acknowledge the difficulty in assigning some models to particular vehicle classes.