

# How is the auto industry responding to eco-sustainability?

The automotive industry has emphatically joined the green movement over the past decade, with more than 80% of a car today being able to be recycled, says Jakkie Olivier, CEO of the Retail Motor Industry Organisation (RMI). From used oil to the metal and tyres to battery components and copper wire, the proportion of the modern car that can be re-used or recycled is steadily growing.

That is even before taking into account the massive research and development (R&D) going into new car models by the automotive manufacturers. The Retail Motor Industry (RMI) is spearheading this issue, together with its constituent associations.



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Parts of a car can be recycled, either during its life through regular maintenance and replacement of worn parts; following an accident, as part of the motor repair; or at the end of its lifecycle, Olivier explains. He breaks down the process of recycling car parts:

“Working car parts – either during its life or when the entire car is disposed of - are first salvaged,” says Olivier. In addition, working batteries, wheels and tyres that are in functional shape can be sold as spares. During maintenance, old tyres are recycled into new rubber materials; while damaged items can be recycled, broken down or disposed of with minimal environmental impact, depending on their condition.

Tens of thousands of tonnes of oil are used in South Africa each year, he says, and these fluids - in addition to used oil, there is brake fluid and engine coolant - can be recycled and refined into new oil, or can be sold to industries that burn oil in their manufacturing process.

Used oil is classified a hazardous substance, is strictly governed by environmental laws, and its storage and disposal has to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Management: Waste Act. Despite the fact that it is illegal to dump engine oil or pour it down the drain, currently less than a third of all waste oil produced by motorists is recycled – based on the statistics that approximately half of oil production is potentially recoverable.

*“Other hazardous materials such as battery acid are required to be contained and disposed of in a manner which prevents environmental damage at a hazardous waste containment facility.”*

That still leaves a quantity of material that may not be reusable, and these materials are processed appropriately, says Olivier. The metal parts are separated out and recycled. Likewise, any plastic or glass in the car can be separated from the metal and either recycled, or as a last resort sent to landfill. Olivier says the automotive industry is involved in a big push to use more recycled plastics in car interiors of new vehicles.

Richard Green, national director of South African Motor Body Repairers Association (SAMBRA), an association of the RMI, says its members, which represents the formalised Motor Body Repair industry space, are subjected to European OEM approval program criteria which require approved members to dispose of any toxic waste materials in a safe and environmentally friendly manner.

“SAMBRA members make up the majority of these members. In addition, SAMBRA sets a high local compliance level for all members not approved through the OEM process,” he says.



Jakkie Olivier, CEO of the Retail Motor Industry Organisation (RMI)

“There is, however, a large informal sector that conforms to very little in the form of green practice. This informal sector would be the greatest contributor currently to poor air quality and reckless disposal of toxic substances. SAMBRA engages

with local government as an industry authority in an attempt to improve those circumstances, however, little is currently being done to curb disposal and product use within the informal sector.”

Olivier agrees adding that the inappropriate disposal of toxic waste can also be attributed to the private servicing of vehicles or servicing done at non-affiliated workshops.

Despite this, he believes that the automotive industry is making headway in the drive for environmental sustainability. Original Equipment Manufacturers are spending vast resources on R&D in this regard, not just in the electric car but hybrids, with the latter especially finding favour with consumers and businesses.

Various elements of design have been researched to create more efficient vehicles. Such design considerations - like low-mass/high-strength materials used in car bodies, and vehicle aerodynamics - are now as important as low-emission engines. Materials like aluminium are preferred as these render the engine's load much lighter than steel bodies do, meaning the vehicle can travel at lower fuel consumption.

He lists an example of how the retail industry has changed: “For instance, oil has shifted from becoming a problem waste product to a valuable commodity. Oil producing businesses now generate significant income from this waste and a typical workshop can use it to yield useful income.”

The latest initiative to drive the low-carbon economy is the carbon tax bill. The carbon tax bill was tabled in Parliament late 2018 for consideration, to be implemented 1 June 2019. In it, the South African government has committed to ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reductions of 34% by 2020 and 42% by 2025. The purpose of a carbon ‘tax’ is less a way to increase the tax base – its nominal rate is so low it will be ineffectual - as to change consumer behaviour and stimulate investor appetite to shift towards low carbon options.

“Green is not a buzzword anymore, but a standard to which the automotive industry must strictly adhere. Sustainability has now become an integral part of the standards that define the automotive industry,” says Olivier.

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