



Buyer beware

VLS warns that CO₂ emission reductions could end up invalidating warranty claims made by garages, reports Peter Shakespeare

The United Kingdom Lubricant Association subsidiary VLS (Verification of Lubricant Specifications) warns that false and misleading claims about engine lubricant specifications could impact on the CV sector. The technical body says that new EU CO₂ regulations, as well as ongoing tailpipe emissions requirements, are likely to conspire to create a similar situation to that which currently surrounds passenger car and light van engine lubricants.

VLS exists in the UK as an independent organisation to provide credible and trusted means to verify lubricant specifications. Its remit extends to all lubricants, including transmission and industrial lubricants. It is supported by most of the UK's major lubricant marketers and blenders, and is chaired by Morris Lubricants.

Anyone concerned that a lubricant does not meet claimed approvals or specification can report this to VLS confidentially. It will investigate the case, referring the lubricant claims to scientific scrutiny. In cases where it finds these claims of approvals to be false, it will allow the marketer (a term VLS uses to describe the organisation that brands the end product at point of sale to the consumer) to rectify descriptions on spec sheets and packaging. If the marketer refuses to comply, it will name and shame it, and refer the complaint, with its evidence, to Trading Standards.

Andrew Goddard, chairman of VLS (pictured above), states that

74% of cases referred to it concern automotive engine lubricants. Since VLS was created, it has investigated 61 complaints; 60% of these being non-compliance with ACEA specifications and 8% about conflicting or unevicenced claims of OEM approvals. In addition, 26% of complaints relate to low temperature performance (these were mainly transmission lubricants).

Goddard says: "The issue in the passenger car sector is the number of different lubricants that are out there. This creates a minefield for consumers - who generally don't understand what is written on the can - as well as for motor factors, who have to hold hugely diverse stock ranges to cover all spec requirements and approvals. Some lubricant marketers try to bring products to market that cover a wide range of bases. For them, the nirvana of a one-oil-suits-all scenario is far preferable in commercial terms, and makes consumers' buying decisions far more straightforward."

So far, VLS has only investigated six CV lubricant complaints, some of which were transmission oil. But Ted Wright, head of VLS's technical review panel, contends that the pressures are there to create a situation similar to that seen in passenger cars. There is direct and indirect pressure on CV OEMs from the EU to reduce CO₂ emissions: directly through VECTO and indirectly through national targets. In addition, new lubricant standards for fuel-efficient oils mean the number of lubricants is increasing, not only to cover existing

engine types, but to meet unique OEM approvals for new proprietary engines.

Adds Wright: "We recognise that commercial fleet engineers and managers are far more knowledgeable when it comes to lubricants and compliance with OEM requirements. The vehicles are their business, and warranty terms are very strict, given that most CVs are leased. But where there are mixed fleets, ensuring they stock the correct range of lubricants for topping up vehicles, with varying requirements, is a headache, and it is probable this situation has not escaped astute lubricant marketers, who could exploit it by bringing to market lubricants claimed to cover a multitude of bases."

VLS warns that, given the strict nature of CV warranties, claims concerning any faults where the engine lubricant could have played a part would be investigated by the OEM. If the vehicle has been topped up with a lubricant that does not genuinely meet its approval or the relevant ACEA approval, the claim is likely to be refused - or worse.

Lubricant formulators are required to collate a laid-down set of test information in a Candidate Data Package, which they are obliged to share with customers on request. Although this does not specifically address the issue of OEM approvals - as very few oils are marketed without ACEA (or API) claims - VLS argues that requesting this document is the best way of assessing the performance of the product. [IT](#)