Mitsubishi, Daihatsu fulfill EPA requirements

BY PETER BLAIS

Mitsubishi and Daihatsu have worked with the Environmental Protection Agency to overcome potential violations of EPA standards and keep the Japanese utility vehicles in the golf course marketplace, according to officials of both Japanese companies.

At the request of the federal agency, Mitsubishi ceased shipping vehicles and advised its dealers to stop selling for about six weeks last summer while modifications to its Mighty Mite line were developed, said Mitsubishi Motor Sales of America Manager of Industrial Sales Robert Hertel. The company resumed shipments in September and plans to make free-of-charge modifications to the governors of vehicles in the coming months.

Daihatsu America Inc. stopped shipments of its HIJET line of utility vehicles to dealers this fall and is working on modifications, according to an EPA spokesman who asked not to be identified. But Daihatsu dealers were still selling vehicles on hand, according to John Brozek, director of HIJET operations.

The problem revolves around the potential of both Japanese models to exceed 25 mph, the EPA's cutoff point for a vehicle to be classified as a utility vehicle (not subject to Clean Air Act emission standards) or light truck (subject to standards).

Mitsubishi Mighty Mites are manufactured in Japan as on-road vehicles since that's the purpose they serve there and in most other countries, explained Hertel. The factory installs a governor on U.S.-bound vehicles to hold them under the 25 mph restriction.

However, the EPA ruled that a qualified mechanic could tamper with the factory-installed governor so that the vehicle could exceed 25 mph. The government agency gave the company two choices — modify the vehicle to meet Clean Air Act standards for light trucks or develop a tamper-proof way to keep Mighty Mites under the speed limit.

Meeting that limit to maintain Mighty Mite's utility vehicle status was the more practical alternative, said Hertel. Mitsubishi first removed fourth gear on its new vehicles. But they could still do 33 mph, so the EPA suggested the company also take out third gear.

That would have put too much strain on the engine and made the vehicle un-marketable, explained Hertel. So, instead, Mitsubishi agreed to design a tamper-proof, electronic governor, said Hertel. The EPA accepted Mitsubishi's plan and allowed the resumption of shipments and sales last fall, with the understanding the company would make the modifications and keep the Japanese utility vehicles in the marketplace.

The governor can usually be installed within minutes, meaning virtually no down-time for owners, said Hertel.