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Costing the earth: the great Euro 6 debate

As the due date for Euro 6 emissions legislation looms inexorably larger, and engine and truck makers unveil more solutions, the writing is on the wall. Although not forcing greater fuel consumption, as feared just a few short months ago, there will be a cost hike for Euro 6 trucks, probably in the £8,000 to £12,000 region. So prudent fleet managers may well decide to accelerate truck purchases and cash in on cheaper Euro 5 variants.

And why not? With the government's RPC (reduced pollution certificate) allowing £500 pa over up to five years for Euro 6 trucks (a pitiful gesture from an administration supposedly committed to reducing pollution) and marginal, if any, improvement in fuel consumption, compared with latest Euro 5 vehicles, the only remaining imponderables are maintenance and residuals. Surely maintenance will be more expensive on Euro 6-engined trucks, given the increased complexity and tighter mandatory emissions system checks? And as for residuals, well, they could go either way, couldn't they? So, for now, Euro 5 makes sense, doesn't it?

Well, yes and no. Much depends on the whole truck package. Mercedes-Benz, for example, is claiming a 7% fuel saving on its New Actros, by moving from Euro 5 to the Euro 6 variant. Further, its R&M offers are no worse than those for the current Actros. Against that, Iveco is offering a mid-lift EcoStralis, with remapped Euro 5 Cursor 10 engine and a bunch of new technology, plus a Montracon semi-trailer combination that it says will knock the spots off others' fuel figures.

Either way, any policy of re-fleeting with new Euro 5 vehicles, if it happens, can only continue for so long. First, there is a clear cut-off date of January 2014. Secondly, in troubled times, the capital outlay may be too much for cash-strapped operators, no matter how it's financed. And thirdly, there is a clear limit to the manufacturers' capacity, should demand rise too steeply.

So sooner or later we will need to bite this, and other, evolving technology bullets – some mandatory, others simply the new norm (consider braking and stability systems).

That is why the IRTE is focusing on real-world technology issues for this year's annual technical conference at the Heritage Motor Centre, Gaydon, on 13 September. Delegates will hear, for example, from experts such as Andrew Nicol, technical specialist for heavy-duty engines at world-renowned Ricardo, who will provide an in-depth update on Euro 6 engines. Expect to find out about everything from the engineering issues and design solutions to the cost, weight and maintenance implications that really matter to hard-pressed fleet and workshop managers.

Then, beyond Euro 6, Professor David Cebon, research director at the respected Cambridge Vehicle Dynamics Consortium, will look at the DfT's longer trailers trial, revealing the pros and cons of emerging technologies, such as systems for rear-steer, axle lifting and ABS/EBS.

Other subjects to be addressed include: multi-fuel and gas engine technologies; aerodynamics and bodybuilding advances; cost-saving improvements in systems and equipment for tyre management that also claim performance improvements; and the power of telematics to change behaviour and cut costs in commercial truck fleets.

It's a packed programme. I look forward to meeting you there.

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