

DET NEWS: New Ford trucks sport powerful V-6 engines

Date: Monday, October 25 @ 07:38:25 EDT

Topic: Ford

October 23, 2010

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Last Friday was perfect in Romeo, Mich.

The bright blue sky was sprinkled with fluffy cumulus clouds, the crisp air mixed of summer and winter, and Ford F-150s were painlessly pulling 10,000-pound trailers.

Ford Motor Co. has no plans to stop with its revitalization program, and the F-150 has quietly undergone its biggest powertrain overhaul in 62 years. Gone are the venerable 4.6-liter and 5.4-liter V-8s — engines that have powered F-150s for years.

A new cast of blocks are under the hood of Ford's trucks, including a 3.7-liter V-6, a 5-liter and 6.2-liter V-8, and the crème 'd le crème 3.5-liter twin turbo direct injection V-6 known as EcoBoost.

I've always savored the irony that Ford has gotten away with creating a 365-horsepower, 420-pound-feet of torque V-6 and been able to market it as something environmentally friendly. That's awesome. That engine should qualify for tax rebates, too.

The idea, of course, is the engine earns its eco-friendly chops because it is a V-6 powerful enough to replace a V-8. In fact, Ford does just that with the 3.5-liter EcoBoost engine — providing more power than the 5-liter V-8. It's lighter and likely more efficient.

Efficiency is important for truck buyers, said Doug Scott, Ford's truck marketing manager.

"It's the No.1 unmet need in the segment," he said during a truck presentation last week.

Indeed, it is, but that doesn't necessarily mean truck customers are going to think a V-6 with a couple of turbo chargers bolted to it - should cost more than a V-8.

Truck buyers are a fiercely loyal bunch of consumers, just ask Toyota Motor Corp. - a company that thought it could sell pickups like they were Camrys and now has a billion dollar plant in Texas not pumping out hundreds of thousands of full-size trucks.

But truck buyers are also loyal to the number of cylinders under the hood and it's going to be a hard sell to convince truck buyers to downsize.

If they were ready, Ford might have a V-6 in its 2010 lineup, which it doesn't.

One way Ford may convince truck buyers to jump into these big trucks with an EcoBoost V-6 is the same way it is convincing me: Let them drive it.

The near-instantaneous torque on this truck approaches unreal.

Pulling a 10,000-pound trailer, the EcoBoost powered F-150 never hesitated up big hills at Ford's Michigan Proving Grounds in Romeo. (It's rated to handle up to 11,300 pounds.) Maybe the eco-part of the boost happens every time you find yourself pulling your foot off of the accelerator because you think you're going too fast.

I've driven the 3.5-liter EcoBoost engine a number of times in vehicles such as the Lincoln MKT, Lincoln MKS and the Ford Taurus SHO. It's always been a rocket ride and downright fun.

But in a pickup, the engine was all business.

In fact, it's not as if Ford pulled this engine out of a car and tossed it in the truck. It has improved it using some of the same technology that Ford used to create its mega powerful diesel engine in its SuperDuty pickups.

The low-end torque means you can keep your revs down and there's no such thing as turbo lag with the truck's performance. Ninety percent of the engine torque kicks in at 1,700 rpm and holds until 5,000 rpm. Most engines need much higher rpm to reach their full potential.

Leave the trailer behind and the F-150 flies. Ford also let me try some quick drag racing on the proving grounds, where you wait for the Christmas tree to show green, mash the gas pedal and then make a sound like Bo or Luke Duke.

Ford added more than just a few engines to its 2011 pickups.

These are the first big rigs to have electric power assisted steering, a gateway application to future fuel savings, as well as other fine tuning.

Every 2011 F-150 will also come with a six-speed automatic transmission, which adds fuel efficiency as well as makes the gear changes much smoother. This was quite noticeable on both up and downhill towing.

Every year, the F-150 just feels better and better with Ford's continual improvements to the vehicles.

So will truck consumers buy it? Will they see value in paying more for what they might see as a smaller engine? Ford is trying to teach a new lesson for pickup owners: Size isn't everything.

Even if it takes a few years to convince buyers, it's certainly not for a lack of testing. Ford claims to have replicated more than 1.6 million consumer miles on the EcoBoost engine - including more than 1.5 million analytical hours of testing, 13,000 hours of dynamometer testing and 100,000 hours of vehicle testing.

That's serious stuff for a serious truck.

Additional Facts

2011 Ford F-150

The F-150 is undergoing the most extensive powertrain update in 62 years. It will provide new engines and higher fuel economy. Here is a look at the new engines that will be under the hood of Ford's top-selling pickups. All F-150s will include six-speed automatic transmissions.
