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Clock Ticks Down for CF-4

By Lisa Tocci

Just five years ago, one in three gallons of diesel engine oil sold in the United States could meet the API CF-4 category. After June 30, none will. That's because the 18-year-old engine oil category has been declared obsolete and will officially expire on that date, the American Petroleum Institute reminded its engine oil licensees last month.

Effective July 1, no products claiming to meet the category are allowed to display the letters CF-4 within the API donut trademark on their containers, said Kevin Ferrick, API's engine oil licensing program manager. Instead, API is encouraging licensees to upgrade their products to meet newer specifications such as CH-4, which was introduced in 1998.

API CF-4 had to die because a key engine test supporting it -- the 600-hour Mack T-6 test measuring piston and ring wear, viscosity change and oil consumption -- is no longer available. The test was required to establish proof of CF-4 performance. Many had hoped that a newer test, the Mack T-12, might step in to replace the T-6, but last June ASTM informed API's Lubricants Committee that no correlation existed between the tests, and that hope died, along with CF-4's chances.

API stopped granting new licenses for CF-4 products last July 1, but CF-4 as an oil is likely to be around in the marketplace for some time, just like other obsolete API engine oils, Ferrick acknowledged. The major change is that there will be no licensing for these products, and no proof for consumers that they meet the CF-4 specification.

"We expect CF-4 won't entirely go away," Ferrick told Lube Report. "There will still be products claiming to meet it, as with other obsolete API categories such as SB and CC or CD. But there will be no real assurance in place any more as to the product's quality. That's always the case for obsolete products."

If there had been a way to keep CF-4 as an active category, API would have welcomed it, he added. "There were many who wanted to keep it going, but the real driver for making it obsolete is if you can't qualify the product, you can't keep it going as a category."

Thousands of products from almost 250 licensed companies claim CF-4 performance, either alone or as part of a string of diesel oil categories. In a Jan. 7 letter to licensees Ferrick offered several options for dealing with the category's imminent demise.

Most licensees will simply have to delete the CF-4 from the list of categories on their container labels and literature, since their products will continue to meet categories which are not expiring, such as CF, CF-2, CG-4 and CH-4.

Some oils show they meet API CF-4/SJ on their labels; after June 30, the SJ will have to stand alone on such products.

However, a number of products -- perhaps 300 of them, API estimated last month -- were formulated to meet CF-4 alone. These must be reformulated to a higher category, or be removed from the company's license, Ferrick said.

"We're really encouraging these licensees to take a hard look at reformulating to meet CH-4," Ferrick said. "The tests for CH-4 are available to support it, and the OEMs are still very supportive of CH-4." Qualifying a product to CH-4 requires passing eight engine sequence tests as well as various bench tests.

Most licensed products meeting CF-4 alone are sold outside of the United States, in geographic regions where older oils have

significant market share, such as Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. In the United States, API CI-4 and CI-4 PLUS are the dominant diesel oil categories, and products meeting CH-4, CF-4, CF, CE or prior specs hold barely 10 percent of the market.

API's Engine Oil Licensing and Certification System issues licenses to companies worldwide who market engine oils. Each company holds a single license, costing \$1,050 per year for API member companies and \$1,250 for nonmembers. There is also a royalty fee on sales volumes above 1 million gallons a year. Licensees may use API's trademarked donut and starburst logos on an unlimited number of products which meet the category specifications. About 530 companies worldwide hold licenses.