

Automotive News

Truck for the times? Oklahoma pickup gets 37 mpg

Charles Child

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Call it the first pickup for \$4-a-gallon fuel.

The Tiger Champ gets 37 mpg with a three-cylinder diesel engine from Caterpillar Inc. It is assembled in Oklahoma and available at 70 dealerships nationwide.

Of course, a few strings are attached: Outside of Oklahoma, you can't drive it on public roads. It's slow. And it does not meet federal safety standards.

But what the pickup does have is plenty for Mike Ward, CEO of Tiger Truck LLC. Ward, a 62-year-old former executive at JM Family Enterprises Inc., is scrambling to meet expected demand.

It helps to have friends at the state capital. In June, Gov. Brad Henry signed a bill that makes the Champ and a small Tiger Truck pickup, the Star, legal starting Nov. 11 on all roads in Oklahoma except most federal highways.

Mileage champs

Here's how the 2 pickups designed in China compare with the Chevy Silverado.

	Tiger Star	Tiger Champ	Chevrolet Silverado 1500
Wheelbase	98 in.	112 in.	119 in.
Length	149 in.	177 in.	205.7 in.
Width	58.5 in.	65 in.	79.9 in.
Height	71 in.	80 in.	73.6 in.
Curb weight	1,940 lbs.	2,486 lbs.	4,453 lbs.
Base engine	1.0-liter I-4 gasoline	1.1-liter I-3 diesel	4.3-liter V-6
Horsepower	35 hp @ 5,300 rpm	28 hp @ 3,000 rpm	195 hp @ 4,600 rpm
Torque, lbs.-ft.	54 @ 5,300 rpm	45 @ 2,100 rpm	260 @ 2,800 rpm
MPG	43 hwy.*	37 hwy.*	20 hwy.
Base price	\$11,795	\$12,995	\$18,515**

*Company estimates

**Includes shipping

Capacity: 35 per day

Consequently, Ward says, many auto dealers in Oklahoma are eager to sell the two pickups. Trades workers and farmers, desperate for inexpensive transportation, will snap them up, he says.

"I just don't know how people are paying for gasoline," Ward says.

First, Ward must get assembly in gear. His 100-employee plant in the small city of Poteau near the Arkansas border has capacity to produce about 35 pickups per day. Now, Ward is producing fewer than five per day. He moved his operations from Dallas late last year, lured by tax breaks and other incentives from the state and federal governments.

The two pickups were designed by a Chinese automaker, Chongqing Changan Automobile Co. Changan ships about half of the parts, by value, from China. Ward sources the rest in North America.

In Poteau, Tiger Truck welds and paints the bodies and finishes assembly, installing upgraded interiors for American tastes. An official opening of the plant is planned for July 31.

25 mph limit

Ward made contacts in China while working for JM Family Enterprises. In the 1980s, he traveled in China to source parts for Toyotas that JM imported into the United States. Ward has been importing, modifying and selling pickups from Changan since 1999.

In 2006, he sold about 800 vehicles, all for off-public-road purposes. The move to Oklahoma and expansion should push sales to about 8,800 per year.

Outside of Oklahoma, the pickups have governors that limit speeds to 25 mph at construction sites, college campuses and other off-road sites. In Oklahoma, their speeds will be unregulated, but the pickups will be barred from Interstates and federal highways with speed limits above 55 mph.

The Oklahoma law is designed to provide jobs in the Poteau area, says state Sen. Kenneth Corn. Drivers, in turn, get inexpensive transportation.

In rural Oklahoma, he says, "nothing's real close."



ENLARGE

Tiger Champ: 37 mpg highway

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