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Need to save fuel? Lift foot off pedal, try other strategies

This weekend when we overheard a discussion about saving fuel by slowing down on the highway, we couldn't help but listen. With gasoline at \$2.50 per gallon, it's worth the time to learn about techniques and strategies that can squeeze more mileage out of expensive fill-ups.

The driver we overheard normally drives 65 mph, but he decided to employ a strategy that dates back to the Arab oil embargo of 1973. That's when President Nixon ordered speed limits lowered to 55 mph on the nation's highways. Nixon believed the slower speeds would conserve fuel and lessen the effect of the oil embargo.

The Arabs lifted their embargo only months after imposing it, yet the national 55 mph speed limit wasn't completely repealed until 1995.

Today, motorists can legally drive as fast as 75 on most interstates, and from 60 mph to 65 mph on most highways, yet some are voluntarily slowing down.

Experts offer other advice to help motorists improve fuel mileage. Some of these ideas might look familiar:

—Lighten the car's load by removing all unnecessary items from the trunk. Every 200 pounds of weight reduces gas efficiency by one mile per gallon. If you have to carry a lot of baggage, avoid using a rooftop container, which will increase the air drag. If you drive a pick-up truck, the open bed will have the same impact, so put a cover on it.

—Incorrectly inflated tires decrease fuel efficiency. Check vehicle and tire manufacturer for proper inflation.

—Don't turn on the air conditioner as a first response to the heat. Start your drive off with the windows open to exhaust the hot air out of the rear windows and then put on the A/C if needed. This will also enable the air conditioning to work faster and more efficiently when turned on.

—Smooth out your driving style by avoiding "jackrabbit" starts and sharp braking. Both expend gas and can present a hazard for others on the road.

—Traveling at a fast speed in a low gear wastes gas.

—Accelerate a little as you approach a hill, rather than hitting the gas and switching gears once on the incline.

The driver we mentioned earlier improved his mileage by 8.3 percent, averaging 24 mpg driving 55 mph. That compares to 22 mpg when he drove at 65 mph.

It's estimated that every mile per hour driven above 55 mph costs 1 percent in fuel economy. So, slowing down can be both safe and fuel-efficient.

Maintaining a constant speed also maximizes your car's performance. If road conditions permit, use your car's cruise control.