

Ford to Offer Gasoline Ambulances in 2010

Decision reverses 22-year diesel mandate that changed America's ambulance fleet

- James Philips, EMT

Unable to introduce an emissions compliant diesel engine for its 2010 model year E-Series vans and cutaways, Ford Motor Company announced March 3 its plans to offer a V-10 gasoline engine ambulance prep package instead. Amid tumbling overall sales and financial uncertainty, Ford broke the news at an National Truck Equipment Association (NTEA) truck show in Chicago. There had been speculation among manufacturers and EMS agencies about Ford's 2010 MY offerings, because new 2010 EPA emissions requirements were forcing the retirement of its current 6.0L PowerStroke diesel engine found in more than 70% of ambulances.

Ford's traditional market leadership has been declining due to new competition from General Motors' (GM's) G-Series, the Dodge Sprinter, and Dodge Ram 4500 HD offerings. Yet Ford's ambulance prep package diesels -- particularly in the E-350/E-450 class -- have maintained their lead market position despite high levels of user discontent over the reliability of the standard PowerStroke diesel in recent years.

The new V-10 gasoline engine offering has many merits, but its introduction also represents a dramatic reversal of Ford's 21-year staunch position against gasoline engines used for ambulances. Ford Motor Company shocked the ambulance community in 1988 when it mandated a diesel engine ambulance prep package. At the time, virtually all ambulances used a large gasoline engine. Currently, 98% of ambulances in the U.S. operate with diesel engines.

In 2007, the Ambulances Manufacturers Division (AMD) of the NTEA petitioned Ford to add a gas engine for the ambulance community in response to sharp price increases in the diesel engines brought about by new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) emissions requirements. Advocates for the private, for-profit ambulance sector had indicated that a lower initial purchase price for the vehicle coupled with lower per-gallon price for gasoline made a gas-powered engine attractive. Municipal and fire-based EMS services still overwhelmingly supported the use of diesel engines for longevity, and because diesels were most common in municipal fleets. The hope was that Ford would make both choices available.

In January, Ford and Navistar International Corporation's International Truck and Engine Corporation, builders of the 6.0L engine's block, settled recent litigation and accordingly set terms to end Ford's long-term supply relationship with International Truck and Engine for diesel engines. The result is that the current 6.0L Power Stroke engine will sunset once supplies are exhausted in the 2009 model year. At that point, Ford will have no diesel offerings on the E-Series for 2010, only gasoline.

Some argue that the operational and cost advantages of diesel engine ambulances have been eroded to some extent in recent years due to new EPA emissions requirements. Higher initial prices for new diesel engine power trains, and the higher cost of ultra-low sulphur fuel have served up a financial gut-punch to the EMS community. In order to meet new emissions requirements, the new diesel engines burn much hotter than in the past. Previously, a cooler run temperature was an advantage of diesel over gas. Plus, the increased weight of these engines and their associated radiators, and particulate filter assemblies, has reduced front axle payload capacity on many models. Room to work under the hood on Ford diesels has also diminished, increasing down time and repair costs.

GM's 6.6L DuraMax diesel and Dodge's 6.7L Cummins diesel are popular new entries in the ambulance market, and GM has never stopped offering gasoline engine choices to the EMS community.

There is still no word on the future of the 6.4L diesel now offered on Ford's F-series, and the F-Series ambulance prep package was notably absent from Ford's announcements at NTEA.

Ford's new E-Series gasoline engine ambulance strategy is likely to resonate at a time of tightening budgets and some discontent with the current generation of diesel engines. Fuel economy and service life of the new V-10 engine offering, particularly in real world ambulance use, will be a key factor in measuring its success long term.

In the short term, ambulance buyers seeking Ford E-Series vans or cutaways in 2010 should expect to see prices fall using the new gasoline V-10 prep package. In contrast, competitive diesel engines reconfigured to meet the 2010 EPA emissions requirements for other platforms are expected to rise sharply in 2010, setting up a what could be a substantial price difference between diesel and gasoline powered ambulances next year.

James Philips, EMT, is Senior Regional Sales Manager for MEDTEC Ambulance Corporation, and a former EMS Chief. He has served in a variety of professional capacities in the EMS and emergency vehicle industry since 1983, and has been a contributing writer to JEMS.