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GOING GREEN

Growth in Electric Vehicle sales brings new challenges for the Automotive Industry

By 2040, all new cars sold should be electric, as mandated by the B.C. government. It is an ambitious goal and one everyone involved in the automotive industry must prepare for.

This initiative promises a greener future for B.C. however, in order for it to be successful, the automotive industry must develop training and safety standards for when handling electric vehicles. Already in 2019 electric vehicle sales are two percent higher than in 2018. With gas prices soaring and the government offering financial incentives, this trend will continue to increase. What does this mean for the automotive industry?

Gone are the days when your backyard mechanic would pull out his toolkit, pop the hood, and use general knowledge to perform a mechanical repair. Nowadays, cars are as much a computer as they are a motor vehicle. With every advancement in technology—braking systems, lane departure warnings, back up cameras, etc.—comes a new system automotive technicians have to learn. These same technicians must now also know how to repair an entirely new system with electric cars. An uncertified technician will not be able to perform these repairs to the necessary standard of quality. This jeopardizes the safety of the driver, fellow motorists, and even the technician if they are not properly trained on how to handle the battery components. But are their programs in place to properly train these technicians? Will there be enough trained technicians to repair the number of expected vehicles on the road by 2040?

Recently, a Mitsubishi PHEV that was submerged in saltwater caught fire after it was recovered and loaded onto a tow truck. This raised a number of concerns among firefighters and tow truck operators as the battery itself caught fire. While the cause was unusual, a lithium battery catching fire is not. Are first responders properly trained and equipped to deal with these vehicles? What precautions can be taken to prevent battery fires?

When a gas engine vehicle reaches the end of its life, it is typically purchased by an auto recycling facility, which then properly drains it of potentially hazardous waste and dismantles it. The parts that can be reused are purchased by repair shops and the parts that can't are appropriately recycled. Can the same be done with an electric vehicle? Will there be the same demand for used parts if maintenance is less frequent? And, what happens to the batteries at the end of the vehicle's life? Lithium batteries need to be stored and transported safely in order to prevent damage to health and the environment. Are recycling yards prepared to take this responsibility? What do we do with these used batteries?

The transition to electric vehicles affects everyone involved in the automotive industry: collision, mechanical, and glass repair, towing, recycling, and even vehicle rentals. Who will service these vehicles? What qualifications are needed? And, who is planning for this?

The Automotive Retailers Association (ARA) is working now with government, insurers, and service providers to ensure that the industry is ready and certified to properly and safely handle electric vehicles. Look forward to our next articles where we will answer all the above questions about electric vehicles and what industry can do to make the transition as efficient and green as possible.

Article submitted by
Automotive Retailers Association (ARA)