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Under the Southern Cross

Contamination fears rise along with the prices

It has been mentioned many times in this column how Australia is truly blessed with a highly efficient system of nasty refrigerant recovery and destruction through a not-for-profit organization called Refrigerant Reclaim Australia.

VASA members have always supported the proper recovery, recycling or destruction of refrigerants which are either ozone destroyers or greenhouse gases.

The system has worked well for years, with workshops being paid a per-kilo bonus for recovering and returning unwanted refrigerants. We looked forward to the regular reports from RRA that the amount of refrigerant they were handling was increasing, proving that the

scheme was working.

So it was a bit surprising when VASA was asked recently to survey the members to find out why the flow of refrigerant for destruction was slowing down. Don't vehicle air conditioning systems leak any more? Isn't the refrigerant replaced after service and what about the thousands of vehicles which end up in the wreckers' yards?

A survey form was sent to all members, asking about the amount of refrigerant they recover and re-use in their own workshops and what do they think RRA should do with recovered refrigerant – recycle or destroy.

Normally, you would expect only a handful of survey forms to be returned, but the fax machine ran hot as about one third of the membership responded. I think it was the question about the possibility of HFCs being included in the Federal Government's highly controversial carbon pricing scheme that generated the huge and unexpected response. Many of the responses would make good reading, but since the editor will not tolerate obscenity in these pages, the majority of our member's views on the carbon pricing scheme must remain unreported.

But back to the survey results, which are interesting enough. Perhaps the most surprising finding was that the majority of workshops do not recover R-134a for recycling and re-use, with most preferring to capture and bottle used refrigerant and send it back to RRA through their wholesale supplier. That's not to say that recycling and re-use does not occur at the workshops, but they were certainly in the minority.

The members were asked what they think RRA should do with recovered refrigerant: destroy the lot, reclaim and send it back into the supply chain, or reclaim scarce refrigerants and destroy the rest? Overwhelmingly, the members voted to reclaim as much as possible to

as-new specification and re-supply to the industry.

As the cost of refrigerant rises, there is a real fear that an expected rise in the re-use of recovered refrigerant could lead to systems being contaminated with impure refrigerant. Almost every respondent admitted concern about the possibility of contamination, with more than half of them advising that they had already encountered contaminated systems in their workshops.

From the responses to the question about how workshops ensure refrigerants are of the right quality, it seems that the majority of members prefer not to take risks and will only use refrigerant which comes from their trusted supplier. This is despite the fact that refrigerant identifiers are now in widespread use.

Some workshops take their caution to the extreme, as far as refusing to do air conditioning servicing work on vehicles they don't know. There also seems to be a trend towards more regular filter changes on in-house recovery machines.

Members were incensed that the government was even thinking about including HFCs in their carbon pricing (read, "tax") scheme. There were plenty of unprintable suggestions for the government about what they could do with their proposed 'rip-off' tax, too.

And finally, did our members have any suggestions about what could be done to limit emissions of refrigerant into the atmosphere? Yep, they chorused—lower the boom on the shonky backyard workshops and the panel shops and wrecking yards. Get more inspectors on the street, with the power to slap on-the-spot fines on those who either don't have the right equipment, or who flaunt the relatively new licensing regulations.

In other words, get serious about policing the existing regulations. If that fails, said one, make service of an A/C system a compulsory part of a vehicle registration – no service, no rego. ❄

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