

The noose tightens on the backyarder



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You've heard me say it many times before on these pages, but the scourge of the Australian and New Zealand professional aftermarket workshop is a sub-race of greaseball mechanics they call 'backyarders.'

They survive by offering to do any kind of vehicle repair, including topping up refrigerant gas in the aircon system, and they will do it for bargain prices.

They attract those motorists who are always on the lookout for a cheap fix, rather than a quality fix.

Most motorists have no idea how to determine a good workshop from a bad one, so the law of averages says that these backyarders can survive quite well.

So why are they called backyarders, I hear you ask? They fly under the regulatory radar. They pretend they never heard of legislation which requires all technicians and workshops doing anything with fluorocarbon refrigerants (R-134a) to pass proficiency tests and be licensed and authorised. Their eyes glaze over if you inform them that it is now a national offence to 'top-up' any vehicle with fluorocarbon refrigerant without full diagnostic checks on the system to guarantee its integrity.

They manage to buy R-134a on the black market. They con regular customers into believing that refrigerant is a consumable, and therefore they must top up the gas every three months or so. This is easy work, and means they don't need to be bright enough to learn how to repair an ailing or leaking aircon system.

On the popularity scale in the industry, these workshops – some of them quite professional looking and opulent – rate well below that other most maligned tribe, the panel [body] shops. Complaints pour in from VASA members about panel shops which simply open up the aircon systems in 'pranged' vehicles and let the gas into the atmosphere. If one of Australia's new refrigerant inspectors (we call them auditors), drops in unannounced, as they do, the panel guys simply claim that the refrigerant escaped when the car was smashed up. Who can prove otherwise?

For those who came in late, Australia (not New Zealand just yet) has relatively new national legislation which, among many other things, makes it a punishable offence to allow R-134a refrigerant to escape into the atmosphere. To lift standards in the industry, every single technician who touches refrigerant must pass a qualification test and must be licensed. The workshop or any sole trader technician who buys refrigerant must be authorised to do so.

Big penalties apply, and the Australian Refrigeration Council which administers the system is claiming some success as the public becomes more aware of the new laws.

The authorised workshops must have all the proper gear

to extract refrigerant from vehicles and send it back through their wholesaler to an environmental destruction facility. Australia has, apparently, the most advanced fluorocarbon recovery, reclamation and destruction program in the world, supported by this far-reaching legislation.

Now to the real story. The Refrigeration Council has just tightened the noose on the backyarders with new rules which, in summary, say that any workshops which advertise that they repair air conditioning, but have no authorisations or licences, will be hit with a \$5,500 fine.

From 1 July, all signage, such as "Aircon repair here" or "Gas top-ups while you wait" must also contain the shop's authorisation, or AU number. This will make it easier for the gas auditors who do a lot of their auditing by 'drive-bys'. If they don't see an AU number on the sign, the workshop has committed an offence, licensed or not.

VASA members are delighted. They've always wanted the new legislation to grow some teeth. ❁

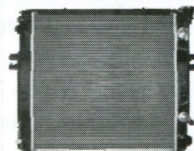
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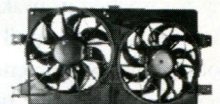
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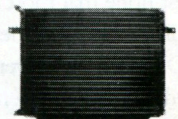
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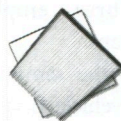


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