
Lube Report Asia

Moto Market Revs Up in Asia

BY JOE BEETON (/SDM/JOE-BEETON-2.HTML) • APRIL 21, 2015

STUTTGART, Germany—The Asia-Pacific region dominates 70 percent of the booming global two-wheeler market, which is set to hit 500 million units in use by the end of this year, according to an Infineum International Ltd. presenter at the Uniti Mineral Oil Technology Congress here last week. The challenge is to match fuel economy standards with performance demands, meaning “a shift towards lower viscosity oils is inevitable.”

As part of Infineum’s pre-conference event, “Infineum Trends 2015: Making a Difference in a Complex World,” EMEA regional marketing manager Nick Burton emphasized that Asia-Pacific is a thriving market for two-wheeler lubricants and additives.

To meet demand in this part of the world, he noted, the challenge is to formulate oils that help motorcycles comply with Asian countries’ increasingly stringent fuel economy regulations, and handle end users’ progressively demanding performance requirements as well.

“The motorcycle market is big business and we expect to see healthy growth, with worldwide demand reaching 132 million units [per year] by 2018,” he said. “However, this growth is not uniform across all regions. The majority of new sales will be in Asia-Pacific, where, as living standards continue to improve, an increasing number of households will be able to afford motorcycles...[including those used] for touring and leisure purposes.

“In the coming years we can expect to see riding comfort, engine durability, emissions reduction and fuel economy impacting both engine design and lubricants,” he continued. “Next-generation lubricants need to be able to deliver friction balance and durability to maintain smooth clutch operation and gear shifting, which enhance riding pleasure.”

Scooter and moped demand continues to grow steadily, in a global market set to expand by 30 percent to 40 percent in the coming years. “The desire to cut travel costs and avoid congestion has increased the popularity of scooters,” he said.

Still, the scooter market is changing. “New owners in this sector tend to be young professionals...and original equipment manufacturers are rushing to introduce new models that are fun, fuel-efficient and easy to ride.”

To handle the start-and-stop conditions common in scooter use, oils must deliver sufficient protection and fuel economy at both low- and high- operating temperatures, Burton said. “But in terms of influencing the oil used for service fill, it is the workshops that need to be targeted, because users in this sector do not tend to carry out their own maintenance or oil changes.”

Burton also pointed to brand reputation and explicit product performance claims as the most effective differentiators for motor oils in the scooter market.

Overall, Japanese OEMs claim over 40 percent of the global motorcycle market – with Honda alone holding 27 percent. Chinese OEMs together hold about 37 percent. However, production is handled mainly in India, Indonesia and Thailand, as many Chinese and Japanese OEMs invest in local production facilities to feed those growing markets, Burton said.

Japanese OEMs are challenged to continue “introducing innovative technologies to improve fuel economy while still delivering the power, acceleration, performance and ride quality a motorcycle owner expects,” Burton said, and noted that they also increasingly expect lubricants suppliers to keep pace.

“Lowering the viscosity of the oil reduces friction-related energy losses, delivering increased engine power and also fuel savings of 5 percent to 8 percent,” he continued. “It is essential that as lubricant viscosities get lower and lower, these oils are developed specifically for motorcycles in order to provide the essential levels of hardware durability.”

Low viscosity oils must provide adequate performance in three critical areas: wear protection, clutch friction, and high-end gear pitting resistance, he said. Passenger cars are not designed to protect motorcycle gears and to offer maximum protection, a gear pitting test is required.

The Japanese Automotive Standards Organization’s MB friction index classification is the most common approval for four-stroke motorcycle oils, Burton said. However, it was last revised in 2011 and is due for an update in 2016. JASO is aiming to include an additional gear pitting element to the standards testing.

“Developing a cheap-to-run and reproducible test has proven a challenge for the JASO committee, but work continues on this important development,” he said. “These modifications would help to ensure good gear protection and clutch friction durability over the typical service intervals and would help to drive the market to oils specifically developed for motorcycles.” Burton said that although Infineum supports JASO’s improvements, it believes the industry needs to develop products that meet even higher standards.

The trend is toward using fully synthetic SAE 5W-30 or 5W-40 oils in mature markets and part-synthetic SAE 10W-30 to 10W-40 oils in developing countries, Burton added. “The increased focus on emissions reduction and fuel consumption improvement means a shift towards lower viscosity oils is inevitable, and this trend means gearbox protection is becoming increasingly important, requiring improved wear and pitting control.”

In comparison to Asia-Pacific, motorcycle sales in North America and Europe remain relatively low, but those markets are “attractive in value terms, owing to the popularity of medium and heavy motorcycles and other higher-priced models,” Burton said.

“In Latin America, we have seen high growth – in Brazil, for example, the number of motorcycles increased from 3.5 million to over 18 million between 2001 and 2011, with 8 out of 10 being Hondas – although this growth has now slowed.”