

EDWARD LAPHAM COMMENTARY 9/3/04: Just who's to blame for that icky goo?

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And now, the Sludge Report.

No, it doesn't have anything to do with politicians. But it seems as if there is a growing flood of sludge problems and not just because it's an election year.

Sludge is that thick, yucky goo that can form when engine oil gets old and dirty and breaks down. It clogs some engines, because of the way they're designed, causing them to overheat. That can damage or destroy the engine.

Two years ago, Toyota notified 3.3 million Toyota and Lexus owners that they had either a V-6 or I-4 engine design that developed sludge problems. About 3,400 engines were fixed and Toyota modified the engine designs.

Now Volkswagen is warning owners of more than 400,000 VW Passats and Audi A4s that their engines may develop sludge problems. And a consumer group says that one of Chrysler's V-6 engines also has sludge trouble.

Experts agree that changing your oil and filter when you're supposed to goes a long way towards avoiding the problem. So does using synthetic oil.

But try telling thousands of consumers -- your beloved customers -- that they're dummies and it's their own fault their engines seized.

It's not a good idea to be that blunt, even if it is an election year.