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With gas prices on the rise, there is no better time than now to think about vehicle maintenance.

"Proper car care is critical during the travel season," said Rich White, executive director of the Car Care Council. "With gas prices exceeding an average $2 per gallon for the first time in history, performing a few basic, inexpensive maintenance checks will make road trips both safe and fuel efficient."

In light of the higher gasoline prices, the Car Care Council suggests you pay attention to these items:

* Vehicle gas caps. About 17 percent of the vehicles on the roads have gas caps that are either damaged, loose or are missing altogether, causing 147 million gallons of gas to vaporize every year.

* Underinflated tires. When tires aren't inflated properly, it's just as though you are driving with the parking brake on, which can cost you a mile or two per gallon.

* Worn spark plugs. A vehicle can have either four, six or eight spark plugs which fire as many as 3 million times every 1,000 miles, resulting in a lot of heat and electrical and chemical erosion. A dirty spark plug causes misfiring, which wastes fuel. Spark plugs need to be replaced regularly.

* Dirty air filters. An air

filter that is clogged with dirt, dust and bugs chokes off the air and creates a "rich" mixture - too much gas being burned for the amount of air, which wastes gas and causes the engine to lose power. Replacing a clogged air filter can improve gas mileage by as much as 10 percent, saving about 15 cents per gallon.

Here are some fuel-saving driving tips from the Car Care Council:

* Don't be an aggressive driver. Aggressive driving can lower gas mileage by as much as 33 percent on the highway and 5 percent on city streets, which wastes 7 cents to 49 cents per gallon.

* Avoid excessive idling. Sitting idle gets zero miles per gallon. Letting the vehicle warm up for one to two minutes is sufficient.

* Observe the speed limit. Gas mileage decreases rapidly at speeds above 60 mph. Each mile driven over 60 mph will result in an additional cost of 10 cents per gallon. To maintain a constant speed on the highway, use cruise control.

The Car Care Council is the source of information for the "Be Car Care Aware" campaign, educating consumers about the benefits of regular vehicle maintenance and repair.

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