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Drive-Time is All-the-Time at Goodyear's Mammoth Tire Test Site

DALLAS, January 27 – While the average motorist in North America logs about 12,000 driving miles per year, it isn't unusual for some employees of The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company to tally more than 100,000 annual miles driven. Even more surprising, some of those miles might be driven in a variety of vehicles – from cars to pickups, tractors, heavy construction trucks and more.

Much of that kind of mileage is logged at Goodyear's largest test facility in San Angelo, Texas, where the company has more than 11 square miles of paved highways, off-the-road courses and test laboratories.

Despite recent leaps in predictive computer tire-testing capability, virtual reality still needs a dose of the real world, and much of that occurs at the Goodyear Proving Grounds. Actual tire testing still is vital to engineering products that match consumer desires, according to Randy Brayer, manager of the proving grounds.

"We employ extremely high-tech and powerful computer models to develop and test our newest products, like the Goodyear Wrangler[®] and Fortera[®] featuring SilentArmor Technology[™] tires. Without the software, these incredible tires might not make it off the drawing board. Still, the human touch continues to hold a place in validating the results," Brayer said.

In modern tire development, the performance of a new product can be precisely measured as it goes through the testing phase. However, a test driver similarly judges how a tire responds to steering inputs and talks about how it "feels."

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“Often, our drivers can tell us how they believe the product is likely to perform before we get the quantitative test data back from the lab,” Brayer said. “If some performance feature of a tire ‘feels’ a certain way to the tire testers, it may send the engineers back to their computers.”

Before the real-world testing at San Angelo and other sites, Goodyear engineers first use computer modeling. Thanks to computer modeling, “we’re running fewer road miles, but with more confidence. We’re able to bring new and better designs to market in less time, since we require fewer prototypes to deliver a tire that meets desired product goals,” he said.

Still, the miles pile up at Goodyear’s giant Texas proving grounds.

For Goodyear’s new premium SUV tire, Fortera featuring SilentArmor Technology, the combined mileage from lab and road tests equates to 139 trips around the world, or seven trips to the moon and back, Brayer said. “The test drivers loved this product, as it was specifically developed to provide a smooth, quiet ride. When you drive as many miles as these guys do, you really do feel the difference.”

“At the facility last year, drivers logged 11.5 million vehicle miles — or 55 million tire-miles — on 53 test surfaces and on surrounding highways,” Brayer said.

The proving grounds, located northeast of San Angelo, are on 7,250 acres. Goodyear began testing tires in San Angelo in 1944 from a storefront base downtown. In 1957, the current site was leased and building began; the land was purchased in the late 1970s.

“Goodyear drivers test tires of all sizes — from small tires for cars and ATVs, to earthmover and mining tires up to 12 feet tall,” Brayer said. Developmental tires can be subjected to more than 100 indoor and outdoor tests, including braking, handling, treadwear, strength and ride comfort.

The grounds include an eight-mile L-shaped track that carries cars, pickup trucks and tractor-trailer rigs on a two-lane road to nowhere; mud and rough terrain courses for trucks and sport utilities; a glass plate for tread footprint testing; a vehicle dynamics area for noise, vibration and handling evaluations; tire-punishing earthmover areas; and outdoor dynamometer wheels spinning year-round to test tire strength.

“A number of trucks,” Brayer said, “roll out the front gate twice a day to pile on miles on surrounding highways — as if 58 miles of roadway inside the gate weren’t enough.”

For details about Goodyear and its products, or to find the nearest Goodyear retailer, go to www.goodyeartires.com.