

Auto dealers rate imports' effect

By Tom Shelton

Foreign cars are highly visible in showrooms across the nation. Japanese autos accounted for 22 percent of all United States sales last year. More than 1.9 million Japanese cars were sold.

Last May, when President Ronald Reagan met with the Japanese Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki, an agreement was reached whereby Japan agreed to voluntarily reduce its amount of automobile exports.

Lincoln auto dealers expressed mixed feelings about the effects of imports on the auto industry.

Heinz Westphal, sales manager of Meginnis Ford, said he wants severe steps taken.

"I think imports should be taxed," he said. "About \$500 to \$1,000 per car."

Westphal said the Japanese imports are cutting into the U.S. auto industry at two high a percentage.

He said the U.S. auto makers are trailing the Japanese in some areas.

"The imports are a little bit ahead of the U.S. cars in some ways," he said, citing fuel efficiency as an example.

Leroy Kubicek, general manager of Mid-City Toyota, said Japanese import cutbacks have not affected his company.

"There isn't much of a change," he said. Kubicek said Mid-City was selling 7 percent fewer Toyota cars but said the prices have remained the same.

"It (the 7 percent restriction) doesn't hurt anyone that much," he said. "If you sold 100 Toyotas before, you sell 93 now. If that hurts your business, then you'd better quit," he said.

High demand

Kubicek said demand for Toyotas is still high since prices have stayed about the same.

"The biggest factor hurting sales is interest rates which have nothing to do with import quotas," he said.

Import quotas would have to be more severe to affect prices measurably, he said.

"Import quotas of 15 to 20 percent would hurt and could create a black market situation," he said, meaning that demand would cause prices to rise.

Kubicek said Japan's auto workers are more dedicated to their jobs than their counterparts, the United Auto Workers, who are fighting to protect their jobs and industry against the Japanese.

Dennis Schworer, sales manager of Randolph Oldsmobile-Honda, said Japanese dedication has been a stimulus to American auto workers to work harder.

"I think it's got them on the ball," he said. "More and more you're seeing smaller cars being built, and of better quality."

"There is definitely a dedication (in Japan)," he said. "A lot of workers in Japan don't job hop. They start out and retire with the same company."

Quotas are unfair

Schworer said quotas are unfair if they make consumers pay more for the cars they want. But, he said, people have shown a willingness to pay for what they want.

"People will buy what they want," he said. "You can't erase competition."

Jeff Mellen, sales manager of Misle Chevrolet, said domestic car manufacturers have a long way to go to restore faith in the U.S. auto industry, but said tax would be the wrong way to do it.

"We don't want them (the government) to impose a \$500 tax, there's a lot of import dealers, and it would hurt them and the consumers who would have to pay inflated prices."

Mellen said the confidence of Americans has been shaken by domestic auto workers.

He said confidence could be restored but it would not be easy.

"They'll have to get the job done and then convince the public," he said.

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