

The Lemon Motor Home

Lots of Misery, Damn Little Recreation

Donald P. Ladew - Staff Writer
Norman Taylor & Associates

If you have heard that you can't take legal action when you have a lemon Motor Home (RV), disregard it. An motor home manufacturer with quality problems probably spread that rumor. In California, your lemon motor home absolutely qualifies under the Song-Beverly Act, California's tough lemon law statutes. And believe it, a lot of them are in trouble for truly awful workmanship.

You've heard the expression, "Just when I thought nothing else could go wrong, it did." This is too often the case with motor home lemon vehicles. It's a problem of multiple manufacturers being responsible for what is finally delivered to the customer. When Ford or GM builds and sells an automobile, generally they take responsibility - as much as they take responsibility for anything - for the whole vehicle. With a motor home this is not the case.

Here's a possible list of major components built and separately warranted by different manufacturers:

- Engine – Cummins Diesel
- Transmission – Allison/GM
- Chassis – Freightliner
- Coach – Fleetwood (and many others)

Various components of the finished product have their own warranties. Appliances are a good example. GE might make the refrigerator and Sears the stove. These manufacturers warrant their own products.

Many of the components, large and small, are in some way interconnected mechanically, electrically, even electronically. The transmission connects to the Engine. The engine is mounted on the chassis, the coach is mounted to the chassis and covers the engine and around and around we go. The hipbone is connected to the thighbone, the thighbone is connected to the leg bone, and the leg bone is connected to the anklebone, so goes the old song.

What happens when something goes wrong? What happens when one or more of these interconnected components has a malfunction? Who is responsible? Who steps forward? In an ethical world, a world where honesty is the rule, mechanics and manufacturer's representatives of the various components would figure it out and the maker of the malfunctioning part would step forward. The responsible person would say, "It's my component that failed, Mr. and Mrs. Jones. We'll get right on it and fix it."

This isn't the way of the world. If you, as an owner of a motor home, find yourself in this situation, you will get to watch a lot of company representatives behave very badly indeed. No where outside of a police holding cell will you see greater efforts by the various manufacturers' representatives to blame each other. Responsibility among the various manufacturers is as foreign as political integrity in Washington D.C.

Motor homes are susceptible to the same problems experienced in automobiles and also problems that are uniquely found in motor homes. Like the modern automobile, motor homes make use of computers to control the various vehicle systems. The difference is that a motor home is a combination truck, (chassis and diesel engine), residence (has many of the qualities of a home such as rooms, showers, appliances, walls, decorative elements, etc.) and it's a lot like a bus. It's big!

There are also special characteristics unique to RVs. Think about rooms that extend out of the side of the coach, and portable bathrooms. The possibility for really unpleasant problems abound.

We see it happen time and time again. The manufacturer does the right business thing. They innovate; they put their creative people to work developing neat things to catch the buyer's interest. This is a good business approach to take. It is how American businesses stay ahead of the competitive curve. They send out their survey people to discover what the consumer wants and then do their damndest to provide it. Now, with the latest innovation in hand, the designers meet the production people. Often these meetings resemble, human meets bug-eyed alien. The innovators are high on how cool it all is, and production is thinking, "How in

God's name can we build that! It's going to cost a fortune."

A good example in the motor home world is the "slide out". A slide out is essentially a electro-mechanical method whereby a room in the RV is made bigger by extending it out from the side of the vehicle. See Figure 1 for an example of a typical slide out. It's a great idea that loses much in the translation from design to production. Very, very few slide outs are without some sort of problem.



Figure 1. Slide Out Room Extension on 5th Wheel RV

We have seen in previous articles that many of the problems were related to electric/electronic systems. In the motor home we see all of the electrical and electronic problems plus the mechanical. This is not surprising. Remember the motor home is a vehicle trying to be a house. Workmanship comes up over an over in the defects listed. Generally, if you buy a new sedan you are not worried that it will leak like a sieve in the first rain shower. Motor homes frequently have problems with leaks, especially around and in the slide out.

At least when you buy a house, barring earthquakes and tornadoes, it is meant to stay in one place. Anyone who lives in California knows what happens to the house when the earth begins to shake. The house is twisted in all sorts of directions. Afterward, cracks appear, doors are out of plumb, plaster falls, foundations warp and maybe the roof develops a leak.

When you drive an motor home all over the country, over roads in various states of disrepair, you are creating a kind of continuous earthquake effect on the vehicle, on your portable house. We see the results in lemon motor homes all the time. Those that were designed with these effects in mind, come through none the worse for the wear. Others, where the driving force in production and they did everything as cheap as possible, manifest all the problems you'd expect after an earthquake and some that are unique to motor homes.

The following is a list of typical problems from RV Owners. I have not included the name of the Manufacturers, as this is being written after the fact, and who knows, maybe they have gotten their act together (skeptical look). In one year an owner reported the following problems with his 32-foot class C deluxe 5th wheel RV:

- Electrical outlets pop out of the wall
- Two entire panels pull away from their frames due to inferior thickness of the substrate and the necessary spacers to hold them together in the range of humidity that any trailer experiences.

- ❑ Panels bowed for the same reason
- ❑ The slideout shave pulled the paneling away from the face wall when the slideout is pulled in, because ragged sheet metal edges of the slideout have dug into the panel due to mismatched surfaces
- ❑ After extending the slide out, couldn't get it back in, had to pry it back in with a 2 X 4 plank
- ❑ Easy chair replaced because the upholstery separated from the frame and allowed the padding to slip down.
- ❑ The center slider section of the screen door will not stay in, due to poor quality control of the space in the center of the door.
- ❑ The water pump which comes standard on this 32 foot trailer puts out 20 lbs of pressure which isn't enough to get water out of a PUR faucet filter less than 20 feet away.
- ❑ Necessary to supplement the heat in the upper bedroom with a space heater because the blower and ductwork is inadequate to get enough heat to the room.
- ❑ The shower cracked, the roof leaked, the canopy broke
- ❑ The toilet lid has broken off
- ❑ Electrical problems and on and on...

And after all this, you have the things people say about the quality of service from so-called authorized dealers. I can't say them here and have this article remain "G" rated.

One aspect of lemon law is how many days the vehicle must remain at the shop for repairs during the warranty period. Thirty days is the standard in the statute for a lemon vehicle. It is not unusual for lemon motor homes to be in the shop for two and three months, even longer during the warranty period.

Here's the key language. It defines a lemon as:

Vehicles that continue to have a defect that substantially impairs the **use, value, or safety** of the vehicle after a reasonable number of attempts to repair the vehicle – 4 attempts in California for non-safety related issues - or after the vehicle has been out of service for a particular number of days. Substantial is from the viewpoint of the owner, not the manufacturer.

Having the slideout extend in traffic while some speed-crazed Peterbilt driver bears down on you is not safe. Bailing water out of your vehicle after every rain shower is not considered the best use of the vehicle. This might also be thought to decrease the value of the vehicle. If the weight distribution toward the rear of the vehicle is so poor it feels like the front end is a foot off ground, this seems substantial to us. This is very definitely a safety issue. I could go on for a long time.

What is the bottom line? Don't put up with it. Get legal assistance. The law allows you to get a refund or a replacement. Although after your experiences with your lemon RV, you may want to buy an M1A1Abrams tank and pay a visit to the manufacturer.