

Nissan To Take Orders For Electric Leaf In April

Dan Strumpf, AP Auto Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Nissan Motor Co. said Thursday that it will start signing up customers in April who want to buy its new Leaf electric car, with shipments starting by the end of the year.

Nissan has shown the five-passenger sedan, which can go 100 miles on a single charge, at cities around the country over the last three months in a push to market zero-emission technology.

The Japanese automaker has received \$1.4 billion in loans from the federal government to help it build the Leaf, and the battery packs to power it, at a factory in Tennessee.

Nissan Americas Chairman Carlos Tavares said he expects about 20,000 people to sign up to purchase the vehicle.

The Japanese automaker will announce pricing in April, but a spokesman says the price will be similar to that of a base-level Toyota Prius hybrid, which starts at \$22,800.

That would make the Leaf more accessible to the general public than other electric cars on sale today, like the Tesla Roadster, the battery-powered sports car that retails for \$109,000. Tavares says the goal with the Leaf is to make electric cars available to a wider group of consumers.

"It's not a car just for early adopters or green addicts," Tavares said in an interview.

Deliveries of the Leaf will start in December. It will go on sale in Nissan showrooms in the U.S., Japan and Europe at around the same time.

Nissan does not have a target for how many Leafs it expects to sell, though 20,000 for the first year is a reasonable estimate based on the number of people who have expressed interest in the car, Tavares said.

Nissan will build the Leaf in Japan until 2012. Then production of the vehicle and its lithium-ion battery packs are scheduled to start at Nissan's plant in Smyrna, Tenn., outside Nashville.

Although the powertrains are different, the Leaf could compete with General Motors Co.'s much-touted Chevrolet Volt, also slated for sale late this year. Unlike the Leaf, which operates on electric power alone, the Volt is powered by electricity but has an internal-combustion engine that kicks in after 40 miles to propel it longer distances.

The Volt is expected to retail for \$40,000. Both the Volt and the Leaf will be eligible

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for up to \$7,500 in tax credits.

In recent months, Nissan has been promoting partnerships with municipalities to help develop electric-charging networks. The company, headquartered in Yokohama, Japan, has more than a dozen partnerships in the U.S. in markets that include Tennessee, Oregon, Sonoma County and San Diego in California, Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz., Washington D.C., Seattle, Raleigh, N.C., and with Houston-based Reliant Energy.

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