

Toyota, Nissan Create Electric Car Association

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TOKYO (AP) — Toyota and three other Japanese automakers together with a power company have set up a group to promote electric vehicles by standardizing recharging machines and marketing the technology abroad.

Representatives of Toyota Motor Corp., Nissan Motor Co., Mitsubishi Motors Corp., Fuji Heavy Industries and Tokyo Electric Power Co. gathered at a Tokyo hotel Monday to announce the association, which includes about 160 businesses, some of them foreign, and government organizations.

The officials said the time may have arrived for electric vehicles to really take off not only in Japan but also around the world as concerns grow about emissions and dependence on oil. But the main hurdles that need to be overcome are better battery technology, costs and having recharging stations in convenient locations.

"Automakers are competing in many aspects, but the entire industry needs to come together and offer convenience for our customers," said Nissan Chief Operating Officer Toshiyuki Shiga.

Nissan is planning to start selling in limited numbers an electric vehicle called Leaf later this year, and Mitsubishi and Fuji Heavy already have electric vehicles on the market. Toyota has begun offering for rental a plug-in version of its gas-electric hybrid vehicles.

But electric vehicles still remain largely experimental. The main users now are government-related groups with only a niche market among regular consumers.

The Japanese government has made reducing greenhouse gases a pillar of its policy, and encouraging electric vehicle use is seen as a key way that can be achieved.

"Please make this an all Japan effort," Teruhiko Mashiko, the economy minister, told the crowd.

The group is still working out the details of its recharging platform. Standardization would require all makers to agree on the voltage, outlet and other aspects of the technology while also ensuring relatively speedy recharging.

Although some participants expressed hopes the standard would spread internationally, Toyota executive Koei Saga said that was "close to impossible" because of different needs and uses overseas.

"It is key that recharging infrastructure becomes standard," Saga told reporters. "But look at how electrical outlets are all different, even just in Europe."

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Among the other businesses in the group are Pacific Gas and Electric Co., French carmaker PSA, Japanese electronics maker Toshiba Corp. and KDDI Corp., a major Japan telecommunications company.

Conspicuously absent among the top members is Honda Motor Co., whose participation was limited to its research unit. Honda has not been as aggressive on electric vehicles as Nissan or Mitsubishi, focusing instead on fuel cell vehicles, which it already leases in small numbers, as a clean technology.

The association is called "CHAdEMo" which comes from the words "charge" and "move," and sounds like Japanese for, "Care for some tea?"

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