Toyota Starts Taking Orders For Prius Plug-in In Japan

TOKYO (AP) -- Toyota began taking orders Tuesday for the plug-in version of its hit Prius hybrid, announcing efficient mileage and a relatively affordable starting price of 3.2 million yen ($41,000), which comes down with green vehicle subsidies.

Toyota is targeting Prius Plug-in sales of 35,000 to 40,000 a year in Japan, and 60,000 globally. The car is set for delivery in Japan in January. With subsidies the cost comes down to 2.75 million yen ($35,200). It starts at $32,000 in the U.S. and 37,000 euros in Europe, according to Toyota.

Japan's top automaker says the plug-in, which it calls the Prius PHV, is for those who want something more innovative than a regular gasoline-electric hybrid, but are worried about running out of power on the road, as can happen with pure electric vehicles.

When a plug-in runs out of power to keep the electric vehicle going, it becomes a hybrid.

"The plug-in is the premier next-generation ecological car that will follow the hybrid," said Executive Vice President Takeshi Uchiyamada, the Toyota Motor Corp. engineer known as the "father of the Prius."

The Prius Plug-in has an estimated electric vehicle cruise range per charge of 26.4 kilometers (16 miles), according to Toyota.

Its mileage is estimated at 61 kilometers per liter for Japanese test conditions, which converts to a whopping 143 miles per gallon. Such numbers vary depending on road conditions. Toyota is promising 87 mpg for the U.S. Prius Plug-in, which will be delivered starting in March. Orders are already being taken online in the U.S.

Green cars such as the Prius Plug-in are expected to take centerstage at the Tokyo Motor Show, which opens to the public this weekend.

Japanese consumers have taken to the Prius, despite a languishing auto market overall, thanks to government-backed subsidies. Nations around the world are offering similar perks, boosting its chance for success.

The Prius Plug-in, which seats five people, comes with a new lithium-ion battery that can be charged from a household outlet, much like an electric car. It also recharges itself while driving like a gasoline-electric hybrid. The battery is more powerful and compact so the back trunk fits three golf bags.

Uchiyamada told reporters that the plug-in was the best solution for green cars as most Japanese don't drive more than 20 kilometers (12 miles) a day and Toyota studies showed that most people don't want to use EVs for drives longer than 100 kilometers (60 miles).

How the plug-in fares in coming months will help show whether Toyota can keep riding on its success of the Prius as a global leader in green technology. Toyota said it had collected data from 600 people around the world who had leased the plug-in on a trial basis.

Toyota has sold more than 3.4 million hybrids worldwide so far, including models other than the Prius.

Selling in big numbers is important because it helps cut costs and allows the automaker to offer products at affordable prices.

Honda Motor Co., which has also been aggressive with hybrid technology, has sold 770,000 hybrids worldwide.

Nissan Motor Co., which hasn't released a global hybrid sales number, is banking more on pure electric, selling 17,500 Leaf cars around the world so far.

In Japan, Toyota will work on services with its housing unit to support plug-in owners' charging stations, it said.

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