Electric Cars Risk Losing Green Sheen In Japan

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TOKYO (AP) — Electric car owners who prided themselves on being green now find themselves in a bind as Japan's government maneuvers to restart dozens of nuclear power plants idled after last year's meltdowns.

For decades, nuclear generation has been a crucial source of power here, but the tsunami-triggered meltdowns at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant have spurred a national debate over how to supply Japan's electricity in the future.

Long touted as a clean, zero-emission alternative to vehicles powered by dirty fossil fuels, electric cars are now at risk of being tainted by their association with nuclear.

If, as is possible, nuclear remains a key source of power, "then the green image of the electric car will get bashed to bits, maybe to the extent it will be irreparable," said Ryuichi Kino, who has written books on nuclear power and hybrid technology. "I have the feeling it's quite possible that might happen."

Not long after the tsunami swept through the plant on March 11 last year, the government backed away from plans to lift nuclear power from supplying a third of Japan's electricity needs to half.

But Japan isn't abandoning nuclear power altogether. Despite the Fukushima crisis underscoring its risks, the government wants to restart some of the nation's 54 reactors after safety checks are completed.

Critics say the checks aren't good enough, and the damage from the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl looms large, with the 20-kilometer (12-mile) no-go zone around Fukushima, as well as surrounding areas, likely to be contaminated by radiation for decades.

Composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, a longtime opponent of nuclear power, acknowledged he gets bashed as hypocritical by people on Twitter about appearing in advertising for Nissan Motor Co.'s Leaf electric car.

Many are not aware that, because he lives in New York, he can get his electricity from a company that relies solely on wind power — a kind of business that doesn't exist yet in Japan, where utility regulations remain rigid and closed.

"How we make electricity is going to diversify, with fossil fuel and nuclear power declining," said Sakamoto. People should be able to choose the kind of electricity they want to use, he said.

Electric cars were proving a hard sell even before the Fukushima disaster. And their green image has a weakness since generating electricity, unless it's from solar,

wind or other clean forms, emits polluting gases.

Nissan, an electric-car leader, has sold just 25,000 Leaf cars around the world since late 2010, including 12,000 in Japan. It is targeting global sales of 1.5 million electric vehicles by 2015 in conjunction with alliance partner Renault SA of France.

Corporate Vice President Hideaki Watanabe, who oversees Nissan's zero-emission business, insists sales are on target and haven't dropped after the March disaster. The nuclear crisis has highlighted that the Leaf can be a backup storage for electricity in emergency blackouts, he said.

What's holding Leaf sales back instead are the lack of charging stations on roads and its relatively high price.

The Leaf starts at about 3 million yen ($36,000) in Japan, after the 780,000 yen ($9,400) green subsidy. In the U.S., the Leaf sells for about $25,000 after applying a $7,500 federal tax credit.

Nissan says prices will come down with sales volume but infrastructure changes are slow in coming: "There is no magic formula," Watanabe said of boosting sales.

Although the Leaf is now a front-runner among electric vehicles, Nissan faces competition from rivals that already offer them such as U.S. luxury maker Tesla Motors Inc. and Mitsubishi Motors Corp. of Japan with the i-MiEV mini car. Others have them in the works.

Some electric car owners remain undaunted. They don't equate their nifty green cars with atomic energy at all despite widespread jitters in Japan about spewing radiation and the safety of what had once delivered a third of the country's electricity. The deficit is currently made up by expensive oil and gas imports.

"Concerns about global warming are growing," Internet retailing entrepreneur Norishige Namba said while attending a recent gathering for 140 Leaf owners in Tokyo. "We need to preserve nature."

Namba, who is against nuclear power, is placing solar panels on his condominiums in southwestern Japan, a new branch of his growing business. He plans to set up Leaf recharging stations on its grounds.

Kino, the author, believes that if electric cars are to become mainstream it's more likely to happen in countries that haven't suffered a nuclear disaster including the emerging markets of India and China.

He also thinks they will be embraced more quickly by car buffs in the U.S. and Europe, in contrast to the more practical Japanese consumers who look for good deals in a car.

Electric vehicles still do have one strong selling point — soaring gasoline prices. Crude oil has shot up above $100 a barrel lately from $75 in October.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Nissan Chief Executive Carlos Ghosn told reporters this week. "Every time oil prices go up, it's free advertising for electric cars."

Yoko Usukura, a clerical worker who bought a Leaf a half-year ago, was depressed by the explosions at Fukushima nuclear plants. She hopes Japan will phase out nuclear power but meanwhile is happy electricity for her Leaf, even with daily recharging, is costing a tenth of what she would be paying at gas stations.

"It is so quiet. It is so different," she said.

But some of the cost advantage may evaporate in Japan. Electricity bills are almost certain to jump as the operator of Fukushima hikes fees to help cover the massive costs of tackling the meltdowns at the plant.

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