

# Japanese Carmakers Going Greener

The Associated Press

TOKYO, March 22 (Kyodo) — Japanese automakers are gearing up to win back the ground they have lost in global competition mainly due to the yen's appreciation, by capitalizing on their edge in eco-friendly cars.

They are stepping up efforts to improve fuel efficiency and curtail carbon dioxide emissions, but uncertainty remains over which type of eco-friendly car will prevail in the future.

At present, gasoline-electricity hybrid vehicles (HVs) dominate the market for environmentally friendly vehicles. But it is anybody's guess whether the HV will continue to be the most popular or whether the electric vehicle (EV) or some other new breed of green car will become the mainstream in the future.

"It would be better for us to focus on any one type, but each type has its strengths and weaknesses," said an official at Toyota Motor Corp.

Toyota is pouring its energy into the HV, rolling out 11 new HV models in 2011 and 2012 including remodeled versions of existing HVs.

Toyota blazed a trail in the HV market with its Prius passenger car, selling around 3.65 million units of the model and other HVs worldwide by the end of January 2012.

The new Aqua small HV the company launched in Japan late last year became a huge hit, selling 120,000 units in the first month aided by the government's green car subsidy program.

Robust sales due to the subsidy program have provided relief to other Japanese automakers as well as they try to recover from the impact of the March 11 disaster, the strong yen and last year's massive flooding in Thailand, a key manufacturing base for them.

Toyota is currently focusing its eco-friendly drive on HVs but is betting on a derivative of the HV known as the plug-in HV (PHV) as a future mainstay. A PHV can be recharged using a standard household electric outlet.

The plug-in version of the Prius, Toyota's first PHV model, hit the showrooms in January. It can travel up to some 26 kilometers on a single electric charge. The vehicle can also run on gasoline alone, relieving drivers of the worry of running out of power.

Toyota is hedging its bets by investing also in the development of the EV and fuel cell type of car, both of which emit no carbon dioxide.

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Like an EV, a fuel cell car runs on a motor driven by electricity. However, whereas an EV's motor is powered by electricity stored in its battery, a fuel cell vehicle uses electric power generated by an on-board cell that produces electricity through the chemical reaction between hydrogen and oxygen.

Toyota plans to launch its first EV model by the end of 2012 and its first fuel cell vehicle in around 2015.

Meanwhile, Nissan Motor Co. is pinning its hopes on the Leaf electric vehicle, which won the Japan Car of the Year award for the 2011-2012 season. With a single charge, the Leaf can travel around 200 km, a distance that can meet town-driving purposes such as commuting and shopping.

A survey conducted by Nissan shows that more than 80 percent of Japanese drivers travel less than 50 km a day, a finding that may increase the chance of the EV becoming a mainstay despite its relatively short driving range.

Kazunori Suzuki, a senior consultant at the Nomura Research Institute, on the other hand, predicts that given the limited driving range, the EV is unlikely to become a dominant force in the eco-friendly car market. Instead, he sees strong potential in the PHV.

According to a survey by the Nomura Research Institute, around 620,000 eco-friendly passenger cars, including HVs, PHVs and EVs, were sold in the world's four major markets -- Japan, the United States, Europe and China -- in 2010, accounting for just 1.5 percent of total passenger car sales in those regions. But the institute sees strong growth potential for green cars, expecting the share of such vehicles to surpass 20 percent by 2020.

Japan was the world's biggest green car market in 2010. By 2020, however, the United States, China and Europe are each expected to surpass Japan as their environmental regulations are tightened.

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