

New, Efficient Cars May Be Worth The Investment

Dee-Ann Durbin, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Gasoline prices are headed for record highs this spring. If that happens, a new, more fuel-efficient car may be worth the investment.

Gas has jumped 54 cents to an average of \$3.81 per gallon this year. By next month, the price could break the all-time record of \$4.11 in July 2008.

Four years ago, car companies didn't have enough fuel-sipping small cars to satisfy buyers, and that hurt sales. But they've put far more emphasis on fuel economy since then, and there's now a wide selection of efficient cars and SUVs.

Want a car that gets 50 miles per gallon? Check. Need an SUV that gets 30 mpg? Check. Want an electric car that uses no fuel at all? Check.

"The American consumer shopping for a new car is seeing the most fuel-efficient lineup of vehicles ever," says Jesse Toprak, vice president of market intelligence at the auto shopping site TrueCar.com.

Ed Tonkin, who runs 17 dealerships in the Portland, Ore., area, says he's seeing more people trading in trucks and SUVs for gas sippers. Buyers are assuming pump prices will stay high.

"We're getting a lot more interest in higher gas mileage vehicles," Tonkin says.

As always, do the math before committing to a new vehicle, even one that promises to save you money on gas. Hybrids and diesels might offer impressive fuel economy, but they cost more, so be sure you'll drive them long enough to make up that premium. At today's gas prices, for example, it would take about 7.3 years to make up the price difference between a 2012 Toyota Camry hybrid and its gasoline-powered equivalent, according to auto information site Edmunds.com. Downsizing to a smaller car can also save you money, but you may not want to sacrifice the space.

Here are some fuel-saving 2012 models. Fuel economy numbers come from the Environmental Protection Agency. Estimates are based on a typical combination of city and highway driving.

— The recent graduate. The newest Toyota hybrid, the Prius c, is a compact hatchback targeted at younger buyers. It gets an estimated 50 miles per gallon, but it starts at nearly \$19,000, which is high for many buyers in this bracket. One answer: Go smaller. The Scion iQ, which is just 10 feet long, gets the government's nod as the most fuel-efficient subcompact. The four-seater gets 37 mpg and starts at \$15,995. There are plenty of cheaper subcompact cars in the 33 to 34 mpg range. The Nissan Versa four-door starts at \$10,990. For a more chiseled, eye-

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catching design, consider the Hyundai Accent, which starts at \$12,545, or the Ford Fiesta, which starts at \$13,200.

— The family of four. The Ford Escape hybrid is a midsize SUV that gets 32 mpg, the highest in its category. But at \$30,570, it's \$9,000 more than a base model Escape. There are several non-hybrid, five-seat SUVs that get 26 mpg and cost under \$25,000. They include the Chevrolet Equinox, Honda CR-V and Hyundai Tucson.

You can get even better fuel economy if you can pack your family into a midsize sedan. The Kia Optima has one of the lower-priced hybrid sedans on the market. It gets 37 mpg and starts at \$25,700 — or \$4,700 more than the gas version. Diesel cars, which are around 30 percent more efficient, can also save you money at the pump. Volkswagen has two diesels that cost around \$26,000 (or \$6,000 more than the regular gas versions): the 34-mpg Jetta SportWagon and the 35-mpg Passat midsize sedan. Diesel fuel is currently around 30 cents more than regular gas, so that will cut into the amount you save.

— Going electric. Manufacturers are still working out the kinks in electric cars. Consider General Motors' recent decision to fix the Chevy Volt's battery to decrease the risk of fires after crashes. Then there's the question of refueling. On the road, recharging stations are still few and far between, and some drivers worry they'll run out of juice on longer trips. At home, electric cars can be charged from an outlet, but it's slower than a charging station. You have to pay to install a station in your garage — if you have one. But for some drivers, it's exhilarating to be among the first to own a gas-free or nearly gas-free car.

The Mitsubishi i — on sale now on the West Coast — will roll out to other states later this year. It's the most efficient car in the U.S., with a miles-per-gallon equivalent of 112 — that's a measure of how much energy it uses — and estimated annual electric costs of \$550. It starts at \$29,125. For buyers concerned about how far they can drive on a charge, the Volt has a backup gas engine that kicks in when its battery is drained. The Volt is \$39,145. All electric cars are currently eligible for a \$7,500 tax credit.

— The luxury buyer. Even if you have money to spend, you don't want to blow it at the gas pump. Buick's eAssist system, which uses battery power to boost the gas engine's fuel economy, helps both the sporty Buick Regal and the Buick LaCrosse sedan get 29 mpg. Both cars cost around \$30,000. Several other luxury models are in the 28-mpg range, like the \$34,900 BMW 328i. Beware: They use premium gas, which costs more. There's also luxury hybrids, such as the Lexus CT 200h, a small car that gets 42 mpg and starts at \$29,120; and the larger Lincoln MKZ, which gets 39 mpg and starts at \$34,755. And if money is no object? Tesla's all-electric Roadster sports car will set you back \$130,450.

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