Chrysler Sales Rise 20 Percent In April

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DETROIT (AP) — Chrysler's U.S. sales rose 20 percent in April as the company continued its comeback from financial disaster.

The company said Tuesday that it sold more than 141,000 vehicles, its best April in four years and the 25th-straight month of year-over-year sales gains.

While Chrysler performed well, sales overall weren't expected to keep up with the blistering pace of February and March. Major automakers are scheduled to report sales on Tuesday.

Sales were fueled by cars and trucks of all sizes. Chrysler's 200 midsize sedan led sales with a 61-percent rise over April 2011. Jeep Wrangler SUV sales climbed 35 percent. The Dodge brand struggled a bit, increasing only 2 percent.

Ram pickup sales rose 19 percent for the month, while the company sold more than 3,800 tiny Fiat 500s as gas prices stayed high. Sales of the Chrysler 300 luxury car more than doubled to nearly 7,800.

Chrysler's compact vehicles continued to sell slowly despite high gas prices. Dodge Caliber sales fell 65 percent, while Jeep Compass sales were off 11 percent. That should all change soon. Chrysler is about to launch the new Dodge Dart, replacing the Caliber with a compact built on an Alfa Romeo undercarriage. The company has high hopes that the Dart will be its first competitive compact car since the bug-eyed Dodge Neon of the 1990s.

Auto research site Edmunds.com expects industry-wide sales to rise 2 percent over April of 2011 to nearly 1.2 million cars and trucks. But analysts aren't concerned, saying April had more Sundays than March and fewer cars are sold on Sundays.

Small and midsize cars are expected were expected big sellers. Gas prices eased in April after a four-month surge, but car buyers remain wary of gas guzzlers. Car sales are expected to rise 20 percent, compared with a 7 percent increase for trucks, predicts Barclay's analyst Brian Johnson. Gas is currently averaging $3.82 per gallon, down 11 cents from a month ago.

Analysts also are predicting that Toyota's share of U.S. auto sales likely climbed back to a level not seen since last year's Japanese earthquake, which disrupted production. Replenished supplies and hot sellers like the new Camry sedan and Prius C subcompact drove sales, analysts say.

Auto buying site TrueCar.com predicts Toyota's U.S. market share reached 15.3 percent last month, its highest level since December 2010. That's up from a low of 12.5 percent last September.

"We knew they were going to be able to gain back part of their share this year, but they're doing it quicker than we thought. The new products are doing well," says Jesse Toprak, TrueCar's vice president of market intelligence.

Toyota's resurgence is hurting rivals. Honda Motor Co. and General Motors Co. are both expected to report double-digit sales declines in April, according to Kelley Blue Book. And Honda is losing share even though it's spending an estimated $500 more per vehicle on incentives than Toyota, Toprak says.

"That shows the strength of Toyota's product lineup," he says.

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