

C-Max Hybrid: A Ford Challenges Prius

Ann M. Job, For The Associated Press

Ford's newest gasoline-electric vehicle, the C-Max Hybrid, is so roomy, stylish and smart, it's likely to attract buyers before they see the noteworthy 47 miles-per-gallon fuel rating on the window sticker.

New for 2013, the five-passenger, five-door C-Max Hybrid hatchback has a federal government fuel economy rating of 47/47 mpg city/highway that beats the 44/44-mpg rating of the 2012 Honda Civic Hybrid and the 44/40-mpg rating of the 2012 Toyota Prius v.

Only the long-running "regular" Toyota Prius, with a government rating of 51/48 mpg, is higher.

But where the Prius' round-nosed, plain styling has not changed appreciably in recent years, Ford's C-Max Hybrid has fresh, modern looks.

The car features a comfortably raised driving position for good views out, optional high-grade amenities and smart tech displays and aids to help drivers get the most from every tank of gas.

As an example, the C-Max Hybrid's Brake Coach monitors the amount of energy a driver recoups during stops.

Did the car gather 65 percent of the brake energy in that last stop, or did the driver apply the pedal just right so 95 percent of the brake energy could be saved and stored in the onboard battery? Brake Coach knows and tells via a dashboard display at each stop.

Best of all, the C-Max Hybrid comes to the United States with a starting retail price that's just a bit above long-running and smaller hybrid cars such as the Prius and the Honda Civic Hybrid. The C-Max Hybrid starts \$1,350 below the Toyota Prius v, which, as a van-like vehicle, is the closest direct competitor to the flexible, people- and cargo-hauling C-Max hatchback.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, for a base 2013 C-Max Hybrid SE is \$25,995.

Every model has a 2-liter, four-cylinder engine mated to an electric motor and lithium-ion battery for total power output of 188 horsepower.

A driver does not plug in the C-Max Hybrid, because electric power is generated onboard, stored and then routed out of the onboard battery pack.

But a plug-in version of the C-Max, called the C-Max Energi, is slated to debut later

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in the model year.

The 2012 Toyota Prius gas-electric hybrid non-plug-in model has a starting retail price of \$24,795, while Toyota's introduced-for-2012 Prius v five door carries a starting retail price of \$27,345. The 2012 Honda Civic Hybrid sedan has a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$24,990. Toyota and Honda have not announced 2013 pricing yet.

Ford Motor Co. was the first U.S.-based automaker to venture into mass-produced gas-electric hybrids years ago with its Escape Hybrid.

But while the Escape Hybrid was a version of the regular gasoline-powered Escape sport utility vehicle, the C-Max Hybrid is Ford's first hybrid-only line of vehicles.

Given the attributes of the C-Max Hybrid, it could prove to be the biggest competitor to 's Japan-built Prius line, which is the top-selling gas-electric hybrid in .

Built in , the C-Max Hybrid looks more compact than it is. At 14.5 feet long, it's shorter, bumper to bumper, than a regular Prius and is about the same length as a Honda Civic Hybrid sedan.

But with total passenger volume of nearly 100 cubic feet and maximum cargo volume of 52.6 cubic feet with rear seats folded flat, the C-Max Hybrid easily bests the Prius and Civic sedan in interior and cargo volume.

For example, with tall-riding back seats that provide more rear-seat headroom and legroom than the Prius and Civic sedan, the C-Max Hybrid has pleasant passenger room, even for back-seat riders.

The tall ceiling keeps passengers from feeling confined and helps make entry and exit stress-free. Passengers in front and rear seats don't drop down but merely turn and set upon the nicely positioned seat cushions.

's Prius v, which debuted in the 2012 model year, has a longer body than the C-Max, but is shorter in height, and can't match the C-Max Hybrid's front-seat headroom of 41 inches and second-row headroom of 39.4 inches.

The Prius v does offer more total cargo room — 67.3 cubic feet.

But the C-Max styling, inside and out, appears to have more attention to high-line details and doesn't feel like a large, plastic-filled box.

Don't expect a speedster, though. Like the Prius, the C-Max utilizes a four-cylinder engine with Atkinson cycle, so it's tuned for fuel economy, not zippy performance.

The electric motor provides zip at startups and contributes along the way at other speeds, when needed.

What was most impressive is how seamlessly the gas engine and electric motor

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worked together, meshing power without a hiccup or hesitation, in the test C-Max.

Thanks to a larger engine displacement, the C-Max engine's maximum horsepower is 141, which is considerably more than the 98 horses in the Prius and Prius v.

Torque from the gas engine in the C-Max peaks at 129 foot-pounds compared with 105 in the Prius vehicles.

The combined power, from C-Max engine and motor, totals 188 horses, and in a car that weighs some 3,600 pounds, this is adequate.

But when filled with people and cargo and going uphill, the test C-Max felt — and sounded — taxed.

A few nits: Tires conveyed road noise and the ride felt rigid on some rough road surfaces. The windshield is so large, the wiper on the passenger side leaves a sizable triangle of glass untouched. The turning circle is bigger than it is in some large cars.

And any aggressive pushing on the gas pedal hurt attempts to get 47 mpg. The test car, in nearly equal city/highway travel, averaged 38 mpg.

Still, it was enough for a travel range of more than 500 miles.

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