Grand Cherokee SUV Makes Jump To Diesel Power

David Runk, Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Chrysler's top-selling Grand Cherokee is making the jump to diesel power, an option driven by demand from outdoor enthusiasts, the company says.

It marks the first major expansion into diesel power in the U.S. by a mainstream SUV maker, showing the potential for boosting power and fuel economy. Jeep unveiled the 2014 Grand Cherokee, as well as updates to its smaller Compass and Patriot models, at press previews for the North American International Auto Show in Detroit on Monday.

The Grand Cherokee's 3.0-liter, EcoDiesel V-6 engine promises 240 horsepower and the ability to tow up to 7,400 pounds. It's expected to get 21 mpg in the city and 30 mpg on the highway in 4x2 models, and 20 mpg city and 28 mpg highway for 4x4 models.

The diesel version will be more expensive than gasoline models. But it's likely to be popular with people who want to tow boats or get outdoors in other ways, says Joe Phillippi, president of New Jersey-based AutoTrends Consulting LLC. It also offers the benefit of savings at the pump, which is key for drivers of bigger SUVs.

"There are plenty of potential buyers," he says.

Chrysler sold nearly 155,000 Grand Cherokees in the U.S. last year, up 21 percent from 2011. The model helped the company's U.S. sales jump 21 percent, and Chrysler says it sold roughly 220,000 worldwide.

The Grand Cherokee is available in Laredo, Limited and Overland models as well as the new higher-end Summit model. There also will be a high-performance SRT version, which promises even sportier driving performance and a potentially more sinister look.

Improvements to the Compass and Liberty announced Monday include new 6-speed automatic transmission.

UNDER THE HOOD: Besides the diesel-powered option, the Grand Cherokee is available with V-6 and V-8 gasoline engines. The 3.6-liter, six-cylinder gasoline engine packs 290 horsepower, can tow up to 6,200 pounds and is expected to get 17 mpg in the city and 25 mpg on the highway. The 5.7-liter, eight-cylinder engine offers 360 horsepower, can tow up to 7,400 pounds and is expected to get 14-15 mpg in the city and 21 mpg on the highway.

INSIDE: Chrysler is adding more luxury touches to the Grand Cherokee. Drivers will grasp a new three-spoke steering wheel with paddle shifters on the back. Laredo and Limited models feature dark wood trim on the dash and doors. The Summit

model aims for peak luxury, including leather seats and a 19-speaker, 825-watt surround-sound audio system.

OUTSIDE: Jeep wants the Grand Cherokee to look more upscale while preserving its rugged image and off-road capability. It has a more rounded appearance overall, with a shorter upper grille and slimmer headlights. The rear features a more aerodynamic spoiler and a redesigned tailgate to offer improved visibility. Front and rear LED lighting for the Grand Cherokee is designed to make the SUV more recognizable from afar or at night.

PRICE: Will be announced closer to when the vehicles goes on sale, which is in the next few months.

CHEERS: The revamped styling and luxury features place it more solidly in the higher-end SUV market. It preserves the rugged capabilities exuded by Jeep, but improved fuel economy and towing power will be a selling point.

JEERS: It's unclear how much of a premium buyers will pay for the diesel-powered Grand Cherokee, or whether drivers accustomed to gasoline-powered vehicles will buy it. If power is key, will the boost to the Grand Cherokee be enough to draw pickup drivers, too?

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