

Automotive News

Bush electrifies plug-in fans

President scoops Johnson Controls' plans for batteries

Harry Stoffer

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WASHINGTON -- Here's a tip: Plug-in hybrids are not as far-fetched as automakers have let on.

Who says? President Bush.

The president says Johnson Controls Inc. is developing batteries for the next generation of hybrids -- ones that can be plugged in.

Regular hybrids combine electric motors and internal combustion engines. Advocates of the technology say hybrids cut fuel use and emissions and improve performance. A hybrid that could be plugged into an outlet when it is not in use would have far greater range in the more economical all-electric mode, proponents argue.

Bush's comment about hybrids did not get the coverage of his State of the Union remarks in favor of ethanol fuel made from plants. But it may be just as revolutionary for the former oilman.

Plug-in supporters "just fell off their chairs," says Felix Kramer, founder of a group called the California Cars Initiative, which promotes the technology.

Bush visited Johnson Controls' Milwaukee plant last month. The supplier is a top producer of traditional 12-volt lead acid batteries. The company is getting into the hybrid business, now dominated by suppliers of nickel-metal hydride batteries, by making lithium ion batteries.

Mike Andrew, Johnson Controls' chief of program management, says lithium ion batteries promise to store more energy but weigh less than nickel metal hydride batteries.

"Looking to the future, in terms of the broader market opportunity for hybrids and plug-in hybrids, we feel that lithium ion technology is the horse that we want to ride," Andrew told *Automotive News*.

Andrew declined to name a potential customer. "We are in discussions with just about every major OEM out there," he adds.

As for plug-ins specifically, he says: "We see an opportunity there for an extension of a product line."

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Answers, please

These issues must be resolved before plug-in hybrids can become a reasonable option.

- Will battery technology advance enough to make plug-ins desirable?
 - Do consumers want vehicles that plug in?
 - Can automakers and suppliers afford r&d for yet another technology option?
 - Do larger battery packs create safety hazards?
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Mixed signals

Automakers remain cautious about plug-ins, at least publicly. They were burned by unhappy experiences with all-electric vehicles. Car companies promote hybrids as vehicles that don't have to be plugged in.

American Honda Motor Co., which touts its environmental credentials, believes plug-in technology faces big hurdles. The company is not working on such a vehicle, spokesman Sage Marie says.

At the same time, DaimlerChrysler is producing a small test fleet of Sprinter commercial vans with plug-in hybrid power.

Tax credits

The push for plug-ins comes from an unusual coalition of environmental groups, electric utilities, national security organizations and government officials.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, sponsored a law that provides consumer tax credits for advanced-technology vehicles. He says a plug-in hybrid with an internal combustion engine, running on U.S.-made ethanol, is a potential "silver bullet" for the nation's energy problems.

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In Germany, DaimlerChrysler is building Sprinters that feature plug-in electrical hybrid-drive systems.

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