

What a Ride

Hybrids can help save the environment and your pocketbook — and now there are more options than ever



If you think hybrid cars are a fad, think again. They've only been marketed to the public since 1997, but analysts predict more than 750,000 hybrids will be sold by 2012.

Sure, naysayers still gripe about sticker price, promised gas mileage, and that big, expensive battery that powers the gas-electric engine. But most industry experts say this new breed is

here to stay, despite conflicting reports about its economic value.

Mixed reviews

Last summer Edmunds.com, an auto research site, reported the price, insurance, and other expenses of most hybrids offset any gas savings consumers might get during the first five years of ownership.

In contrast, the British Columbia Automobile Association issued an analysis that found minimal cost differences between hybrids and conventional cars over a five-year period.

Andy Frank, a University of California, Davis, engineering professor, knows one thing for sure: "Long term, the price of gasoline is not going down," he says. "As gas prices keep going up, the hybrid will become more popular and the demand for even more improvements will increase."



Automakers shift gears

And that's precisely why Ford plans to offer hybrids in half the Ford, Lincoln, and Mercury lineup by 2010. Toyota is doubling its hybrid output this year while Honda continues to offer three hybrid models, including a newly redesigned Civic. In addition, General Motors Corp., BMW, and DaimlerChrysler formed an alliance last year to develop hybrid drive systems, as did Volkswagen, Porsche, and Audi.

All of that activity means hybrids will only get better — and cheaper. "I think hybrids are certainly a bridge to something else, whether it's fuel-cell technology

No hybrid? Here's how to save gas

IF YOU...	...YOU CAN SAVE	WHY
SLOW DOWN	21¢ to 71¢ per gallon.	For each 5 mph over 60, you pay an extra 15 cents a gallon.
DRIVE CONSISTENTLY	15¢ to \$1.01 per gallon.	Speeding, braking, and quick acceleration waste gas.
GET A TUNE-UP	13¢ per gallon.	Poorly tuned engines burn more gas.
REPLACE DIRTY AIR FILTERS	up to 31¢ per gallon.	Dirt, dust, and bugs cause your engine to work harder.
PUMP UP YOUR TIRES	up to 9¢ per gallon.	Underinflated tires cause more resistance and wear down more quickly.
USE THE RIGHT OIL GRADE	3¢ to 6¢ per gallon.	The manufacturer's recommended grade of motor oil and one labeled "energy conserving" will reduce friction in the engine.

Source: fueleconomy.gov. Cost savings are based on an assumed fuel price of \$3.07 per gallon.

or whatever," says John Davis, executive producer and host of PBS' "Motorweek."

Mr. Davis still thinks they're too pricey. Also, he says owners would have to drive seven to 10 years to realize a savings. "But there's more working here than just the financial payback," he says. "Consumers want to feel good about themselves, to do the right thing for the environment."

What's next

At UC, Davis, Mr. Frank predicts the next phase of hybrid cars will be plug-ins — vehicles that can recharge their batteries from cheap, off-peak power overnight or home solar and wind power. Mr. Frank heads the university's Hybrid Electric Vehicle Center and has been experimenting with hybrids for 25 years.

"If you have a plug-in that goes 50-60 miles on electricity, it's almost a no-brainer," he says. "It's bound to happen." <<

Good news: Hybrids have tax benefits

Consumers who buy hybrids this year may be eligible for a tax credit rather than a deduction. The amount depends on fuel economy, estimated fuel savings, and other factors. Last year, the government offered a \$2,000 tax deduction for hybrids purchased by Dec. 31, 2005. See details at www.fueleconomy.gov.

Hybrids reduce greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, which some scientists believe are responsible for global warming.

