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Alternatives to gas guzzlers

High-mileage automotive choices abound in 2011 with smaller cars, hybrids and even some pure electrics

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By Cheryl Jensen and Christopher Jensen

This year consumers concerned either about the environment or what they're paying at the pump — or both — have more high-mileage automotive choices than ever before.

"This year there are nearly 200 models that get 30 miles per gallon — or greater — on the highway, a nearly 50 percent increase over 2009," said Wade Newton, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

Not only are automakers offering some smaller cars based on their popular and sophisticated European models, but they are introducing more hybrids — including some that are mid-size — and even some pure electric vehicles.

We are also witnessing a tiny break with one tradition: Charging more for a hybrid. The 2011 Lincoln MKZ Hybrid costs \$34,330 — the same as the standard MKZ. That is important because "there is somebody in the marketplace saying you don't have to pay more for a hybrid," said James Bell, executive market analyst with Kelley Blue Book.

Bell says that means hybrids could become "more mainstream, not being seen as fancy science experiments, but being seen as an attractive trim level of any product."

This swarm of more fuel-efficient vehicles is not a coincidence. Automakers began preparing to deliver vehicles that get more miles per gallon several years ago, knowing that they could no longer avoid significantly higher fuel economy requirements, said Dan Becker, the director of the Safe Climate Campaign, which is affiliated with the Center for Auto Safety in Washington, D.C.

"Change was in the wind," he said.

That change officially arrived earlier this year when the government announced those standards, which require new passenger vehicles to achieve the equivalent of a combined city and highway fuel economy average of 35.5 mpg by 2016.

With automakers providing more fuel-efficient vehicles, the big question is whether people will buy them, said Newton.

"We're now counting on consumers. As automakers we need consumers to support these products with their buying decisions," he said.

Here's a look at some of the new fuel sippers either on sale or on the way.

Small and new

* The Ford Fiesta is based on a popular European model. It has a 120-horsepower, 1.6-liter 4-cylinder engine and either a 5-speed manual or 6-speed automatic. The Super Fuel Economy model is rated at 29 mpg city and 40 mpg highway, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

* The Mazda2 is available only as a hatchback and is about five inches shorter than the Fiesta hatchback. It has a 100-horsepower, 1.5-liter engine and comes with either a 5-speed manual or 4-speed automatic. The EPA rates it at a maximum of 29 mpg city and 35 mpg highway with the manual transmission.

* The Nissan Juke is a little longer than the Fiesta and Mazda2 but offers lots more power thanks to a turbocharged 1.6-liter, 4-cylinder rated at 188 horsepower. It is available in front-wheel-drive or all-wheel-drive. Transmissions are a 6-speed manual or a continuously variable automatic. The best fuel economy comes from the front-wheel-drive with the automatic transmission: 27 mpg city and 32 mpg highway.

* The Chevrolet Cruze is aimed at vehicles such as the Honda Civic. Most models get a turbocharged 1.4-liter, 4-cylinder engine rated at 138 horsepower. The automaker predicts 24 mpg city and 36 mpg highway with the automatic. A special "Eco" model coming later should get "up to 40 mpg on the highway," according to GM.

* An all-new Ford Focus arrives early next year as a 2012 model. It will have a 6-speed automatic and a sophisticated 2-liter 4-cylinder using direct injection for better fuel economy and more power. It is also expected to be larger — and more expensive — than the current models.

* Toyota calls its new Scion iQ a "premium minicar," and it really is mini. The three-seater is only about 14 inches longer than a Smart fortwo. Toyota says its combined city and highway mileage will be "in the high 30s." It goes on sale early in 2011 and the price has not been announced.

* Chrysler's new owners are bringing the tiny Fiat 500 to the U.S. late this year. It will have a 1.4-liter, 4-cylinder; but Chrysler has yet to release any other details.

Hybrids and electrics

* The Honda CR-Z combines a sporty two-seater with hybrid technology. The best fuel economy rating is 35 mpg city and 39 mpg highway.

* The Lincoln MKZ Hybrid is rated at 41 mpg city and 36 mpg highway. Opt for the standard, front-wheel-drive MKZ, and the mileage estimate is 18 mpg city and 27 mpg highway.

* The Hyundai Sonata Hybrid goes on sale late this year and the automaker predicts 37 mpg city and 39 mpg highway. The Sonata is a five-passenger sedan aimed at the Ford Fusion and Toyota Camry hybrids. Pricing has yet to be announced.

* Currently on sale, the Tesla Roadster is a full electric vehicle; the company claims the two-seater has a 245-mile range.

* The Chevrolet Volt is described by the automaker as an "extended range electric vehicle." Chevrolet says it can cover "up to 40 miles" on its electric batteries alone. But when the batteries are drained it switches over to a 1.4-liter, 4-cylinder engine that acts as a generator and provides electricity to power the Volt. It goes on sale at the end of this year and is expected to be available nationwide by next fall.

* The Nissan LEAF is a pure electric. When the battery runs down it stops. But Nissan says it has a range of up to 100 miles. It is a four-door hatchback, and Nissan says it will hold five passengers. It goes on sale early next year with a staggered introduction nationwide.

* Ford says it will introduce an electric version of its new Focus in 2011. Range is predicted to be up to 100 miles on a full charge.

* Mitsubishi says it will start selling its electric vehicle, the i-MiEV minicar, in about a year. The automaker says the four-passenger vehicle will have a range of up to 100 mpg

Looking way ahead

- * Chrysler says it will introduce an electric version of its Fiat 500 in 2012. No other details were provided but the automaker said "pricing would be competitive with other electric vehicles."
- * Toyota says it will have plug-in versions of the Prius hybrid on sale in 2012.
- * Smart says it will have an electric version of its Smart fortwo in 2012. The range of the two-seater is expected to be about 80 miles.
- * Toyota says it will have an electric version of its RAV4 sport utility in 2012. No details are available.
- * Tesla says it will have a four-door sedan capable of going 300 miles per charge. No pricing information is available.
- * Volkswagen says it will have an electric four-seater called the E-Up! on sale in 2013. The range is expected to be about 80 miles.

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